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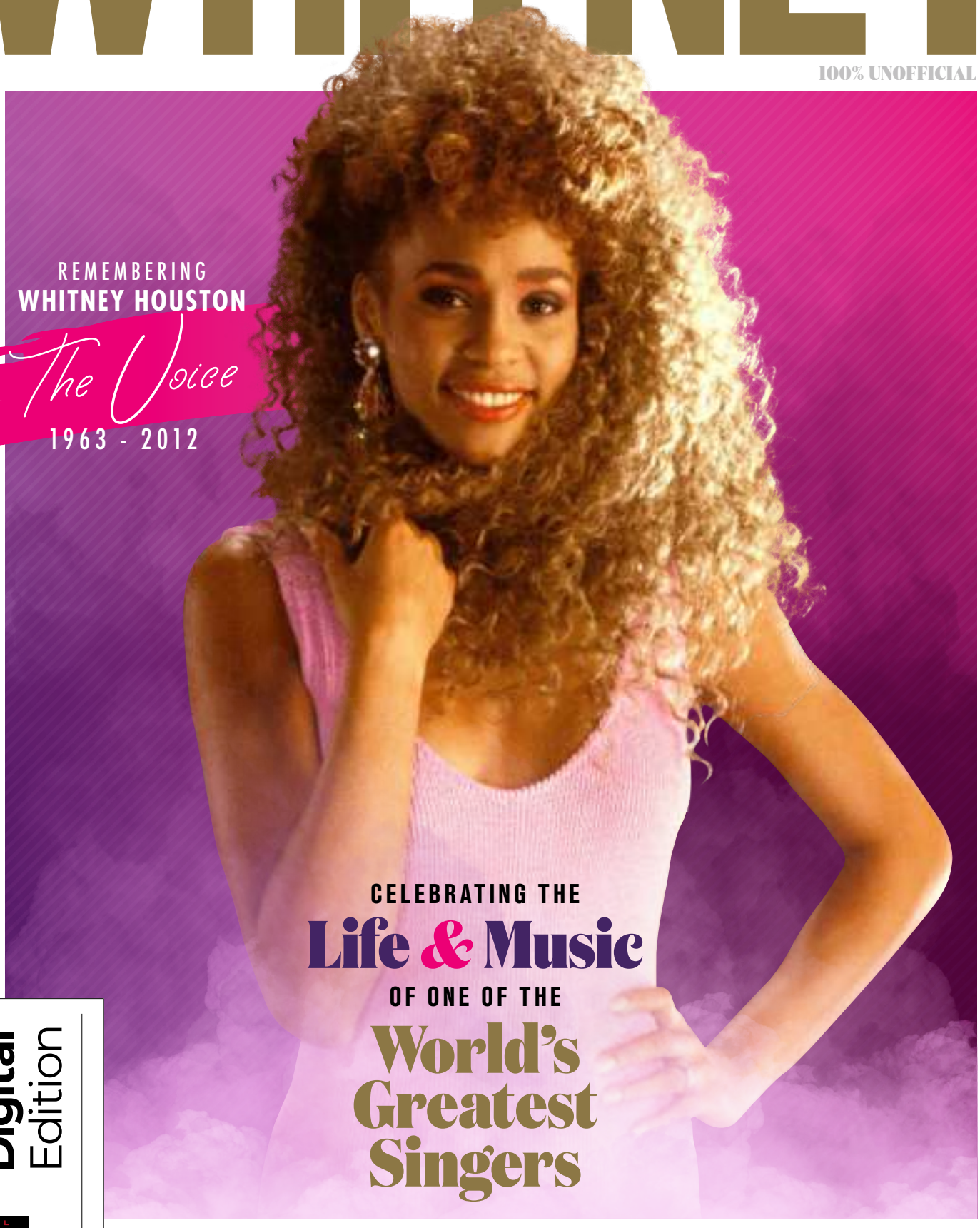

REMEMBERING
WHITNEY HOUSTON

The Voice

1963 - 2012

CELEBRATING THE

Life & Music

OF ONE OF THE

World's Greatest Singers

EARLY LIFE / GLOBAL STARDOM / TRIUMPH & TRAGEDY

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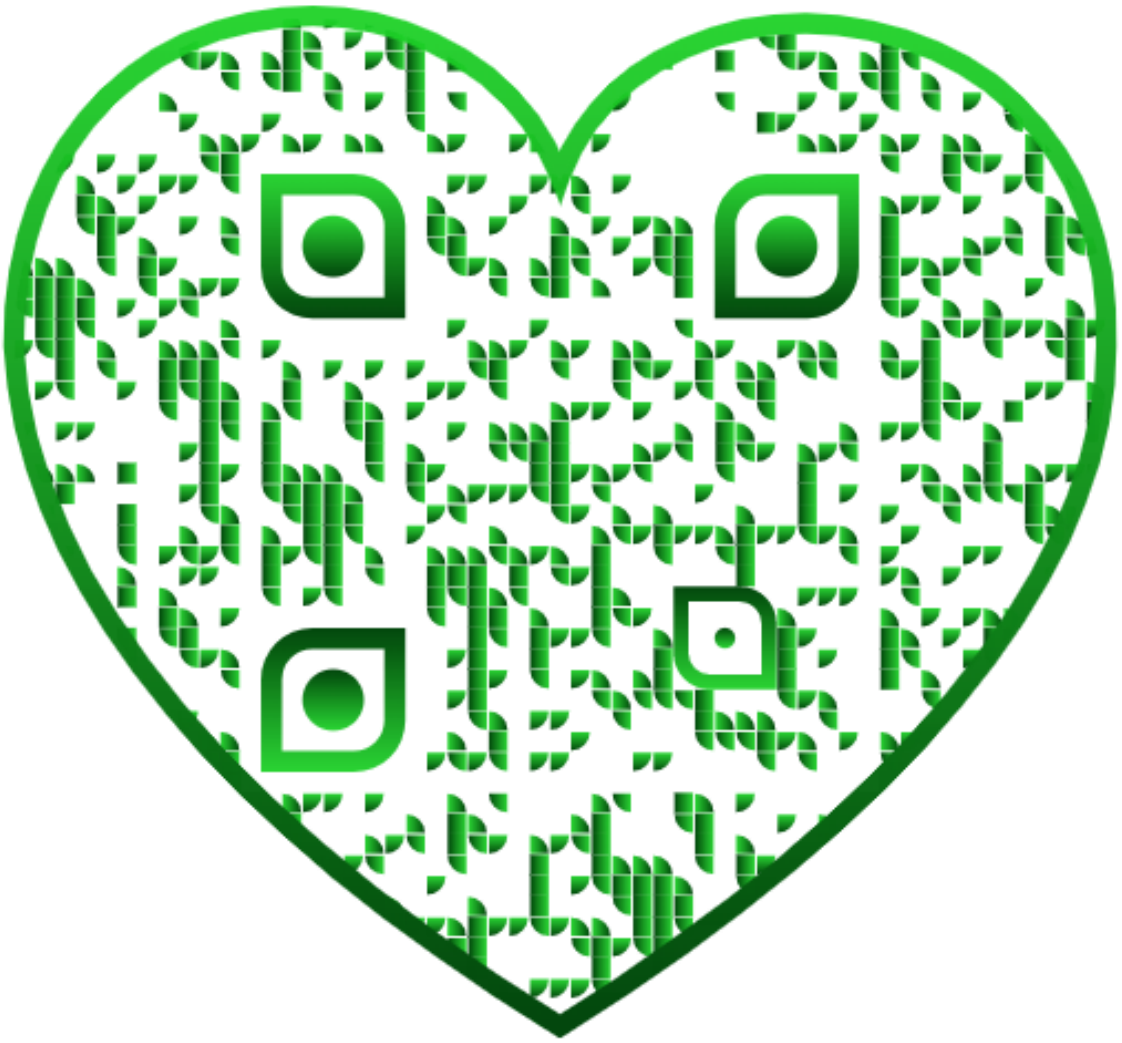


Queen of the Night

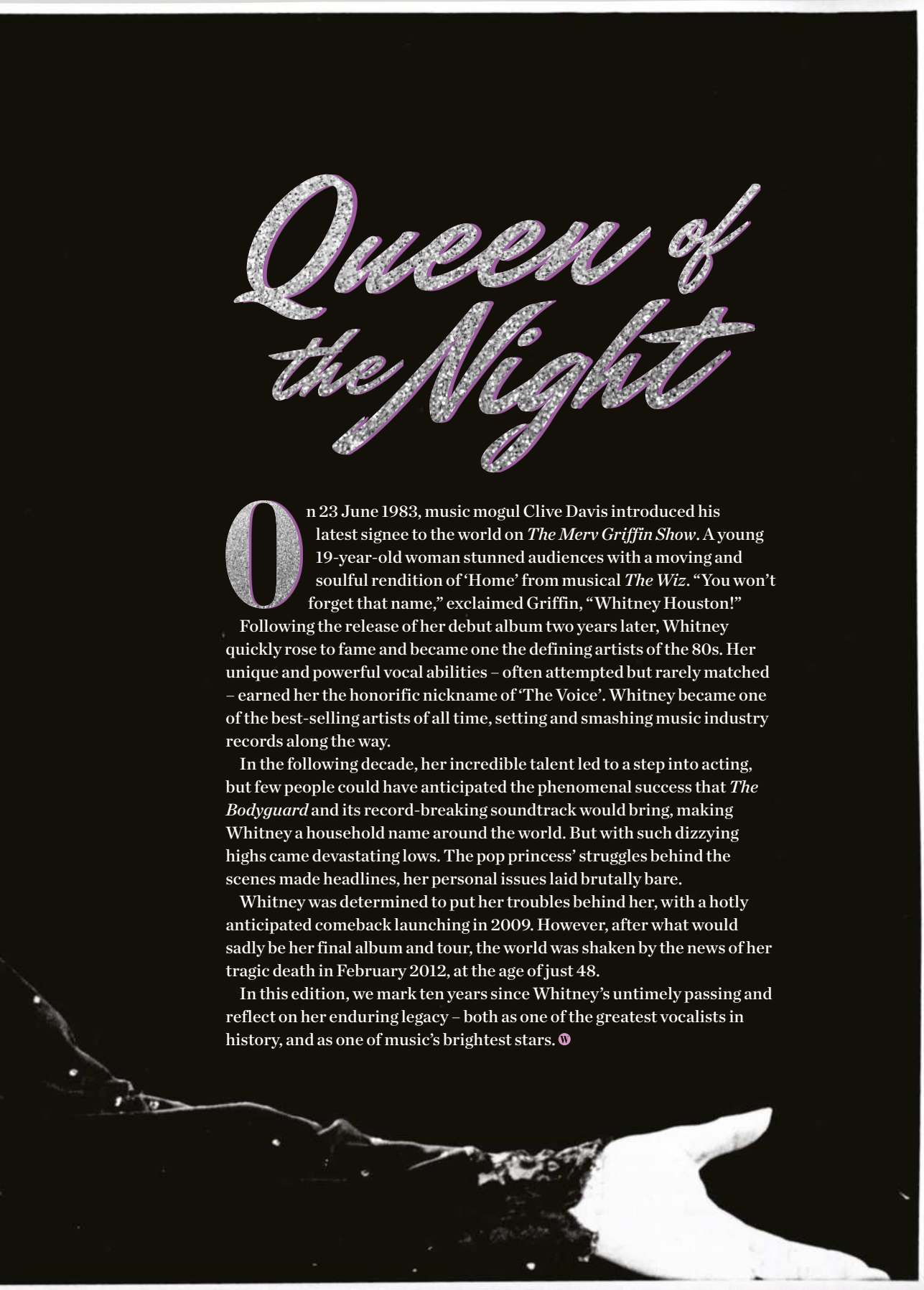
On 23 June 1983, music mogul Clive Davis introduced his latest signee to the world on *The Merv Griffin Show*. A young 19-year-old woman stunned audiences with a moving and soulful rendition of 'Home' from musical *The Wiz*. "You won't forget that name," exclaimed Griffin, "Whitney Houston!"

Following the release of her debut album two years later, Whitney quickly rose to fame and became one the defining artists of the 80s. Her unique and powerful vocal abilities – often attempted but rarely matched – earned her the honorific nickname of 'The Voice'. Whitney became one of the best-selling artists of all time, setting and smashing music industry records along the way.

In the following decade, her incredible talent led to a step into acting, but few people could have anticipated the phenomenal success that *The Bodyguard* and its record-breaking soundtrack would bring, making Whitney a household name around the world. But with such dizzying highs came devastating lows. The pop princess' struggles behind the scenes made headlines, her personal issues laid brutally bare.

Whitney was determined to put her troubles behind her, with a hotly anticipated comeback launching in 2009. However, after what would sadly be her final album and tour, the world was shaken by the news of her tragic death in February 2012, at the age of just 48.

In this edition, we mark ten years since Whitney's untimely passing and reflect on her enduring legacy – both as one of the greatest vocalists in history, and as one of music's brightest stars.



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ARETHA & WHITNEY
IT ISN'T, IT WASN'T, IT AIN'T NEVER GONNA BE
WHITNEY
HOW WILL I KNOW
I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who
KEVIN COSTNER
WHITNEY HOUSTON
THE BODYGUARD
ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK
WHITNEY HOUSTON
Whitney
LOVE WILL SAVE THE DAY
GREATEST LOVE
WHITNEY HOUSTON
SAVING ALL MY LOVE FOR
Whitney
DIDN'T WE ALMOST HAVE IT ALL
WHITNEY
where do broken hearts go
FUTURE

WHITNEY

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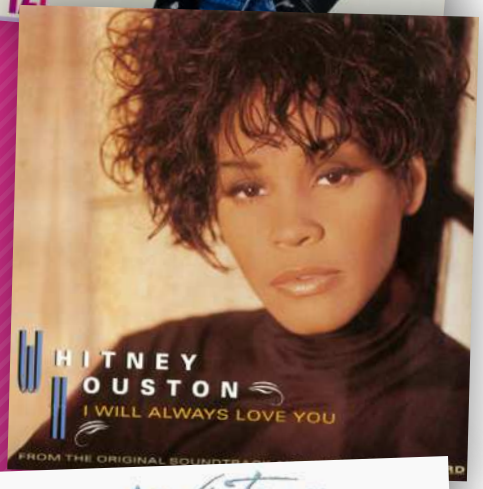

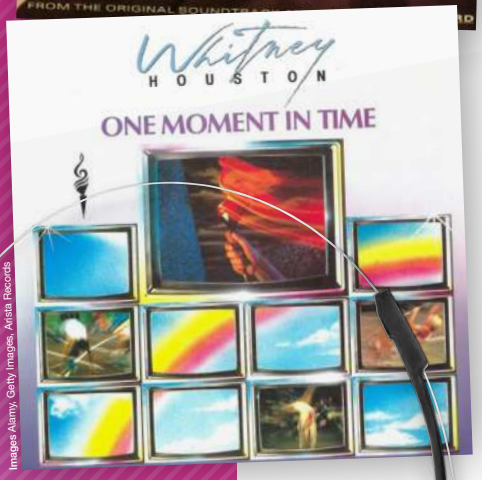

Images Alamy, Getty Images, Arista Records

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CHAPTER 1

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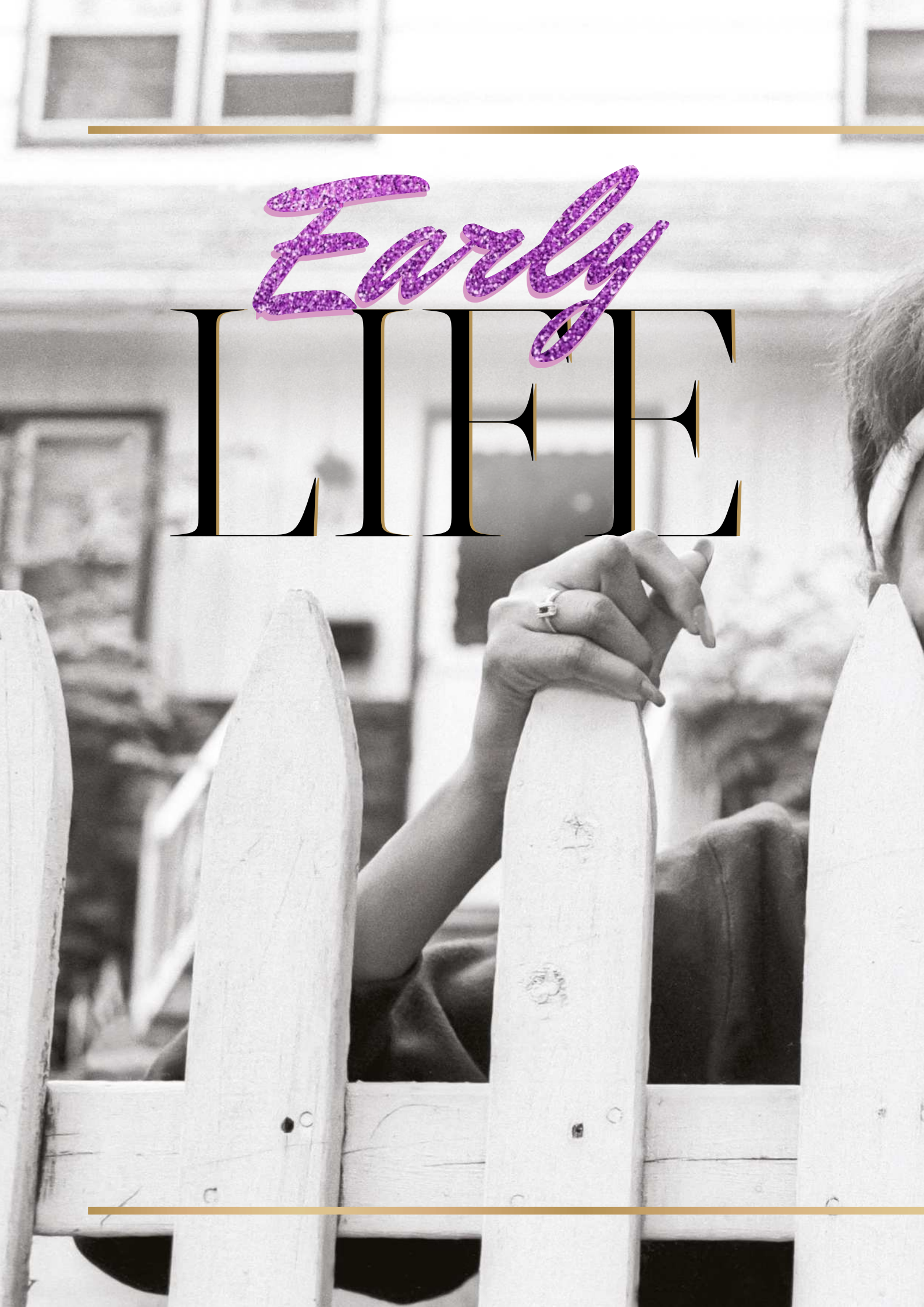
EARLY LIFE


Early
LIFE

From church choir to the clubs and lounge bars of New York, the girl known by her family as 'Nippy' was stunning audiences from the start

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

Image Getty Images

TOP *As a baby, Whitney was given the nickname 'Nippy' by her father, after a mischievous character from a cartoon.*

MIDDLE *A childhood photo from the early 1970s.*

BOTTOM *Following the Newark riots of July 1967, the Houston family moved to East Orange.*

When it comes to charting the backstories of global superstars, few elements are quite as engaging as their early years, the moments before raw talent, relentless drive, boundless ambition and the occasional piece of good luck set them off on their stellar career ascent. Such is the case with Whitney Houston, who was born on 9 August 1963 into a strong and star-studded musical lineage.

Her mother was soul and gospel singer Emily 'Cissy' Houston (née Drinkard), who formed the trio The Sweet Inspirations, which provided backing vocals for artists such as Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and Elvis Presley. Her cousin was Dionne Warwick, best known for the iconic hit 'Walk on By', who had a staggering 56 singles in the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart between 1955 and 1999. Her godmother was Darlene Love, lead singer with early 60s vocal trio The Blossoms, while her 'honorary aunt' was soul icon Aretha Franklin. Close family friends, meanwhile, included Roberta Flack and Gladys Knight.

Given this stellar array of talent, it's not surprising that from an early age, Whitney Houston was drawn into music. By the time she was ten, she was wowing everyone with the purity and power of her singing voice. None of those who heard her back then were in the least bit surprised when, a decade later, she became one of the greatest singers that the world has ever known.

Whitney Elizabeth Houston was born in Newark, New Jersey, a city just ten miles west across the Hudson River from Lower Manhattan. Her father was an ex-Army serviceman and Newark City administrator, John Russell Houston Jr, an aspiring singer who managed Cissy's career for a while. In the aftermath of the 1967 Newark riots, when Whitney was four years old, the family moved to a two-storey house in a middle-class area of East Orange, New Jersey.

Whitney started singing aged five, at New Hope Baptist Church in Newark where her mother was the choir minister. It was here where she got her start and learned to play the piano. She performed her first solo in the church when she was just 11, singing 'Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah'. This performance persuaded both Whitney and her mother that she should become a professional singer. "I knew she was going to be something," Cissy recalled in a 1991 interview. "She had to be."

Even at this young age, Whitney was able to enthral audiences. In a 2002 ABC Primetime Live interview with Diane Sawyer, Whitney recalled

It's not surprising that from an early age, Whitney Houston was drawn into music

that a rapturous response from the congregation had a powerful impact on her. "I think I knew then that [my singing ability] was an infectious thing that God had given me."

It was a view echoed by her cousin, Dionne Warwick. "With her looks and talent," said Warwick, "she had all the credentials. Her success was something that was supposed to happen. And like all of us in the family, Whitney was singing from the moment she came out."

Darlene Love, also recognised her prodigious talent. "She did not want to be a big star. I used to tell her and tease her 'God didn't give you this gift to keep to yourself'."

The Houstons were in many ways an ordinary family, with the glaring exception that mother Cissy would occasionally hit the road to sing backing vocals with the likes of Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley or Dionne Warwick. In her absence, father John would take care of Whitney, her older brother Michael and her older half-brother Gary. John, who would eventually become her manager, was a doting father. "I used to give her flowers," he said. "I helped her with term papers in high school – she'd call me on Tuesday for a paper due on Wednesday. She's always been great with that 'Daddy' bit."

For her part, Whitney was all too aware of the love and support that her parents gave her. She referred to her mother as "my teacher, my friend, the lady in my life" and recalled that her father was

TOP *Whitney grew up singing with the gospel choir at the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey.*
RIGHT *As a teen, Whitney became a successful model.*

Images Getty Images, Alamy, Shutterstock

ABOVE *Gary, Cissy, Whitney, John and Michael Houston outside their family home in East Orange, New Jersey.*

her mother's "support network" when she was out on tour. "He changed diapers, cooked, did my hair and dressed me, all the while providing mom with advice and answers."

In a 1987 *Time* magazine feature by Richard Corliss, John credits Cissy with teaching their daughter "how to talk, walk, stand, project, greet people. She took care of Whitney's teeth, got involved with how she dressed."

By 14 years old, like many teenagers, Whitney had developed a strong, independent streak. In the same *Time* feature, Cissy recalled that Whitney – who was known by family and friends as 'Nippy' – did not date young. "I didn't allow it. Period," recalled Cissy. "But she did go through a rebellious teenage phase, mostly small stuff: staying out late, not washing the dishes. She was lazier than hell, stubborn and opinionated. When she was 16, I told her she wasn't going to make 17 because I was gonna kill her."

From her early years, Whitney had a pure, powerful voice and loved singing. But despite her natural gift, she was not a trained singer, so Cissy spent hours working with her on vocal technique. By her teenage years, Whitney was attending Mount Saint Dominic Academy, a Catholic girls' school in Caldwell, New Jersey. She sang every Sunday in church, and by the age of 14 was going out on tours of nightclubs where Cissy was singing, sometimes even getting up on stage to perform alongside her mother. On one occasion, she attended a recording session with Aretha Franklin. It was all invaluable experience for honing her own stage persona.

At the age of 14, she sang backing vocals on the Michael Zager Band's single 'Life's a Party' and at 16, she provided backing vocals for Chaka Khan and Lou Rawls on their 1980 albums *Naughty* and *Shades of Blue* respectively. Whitney was also exposed to the music of Chaka Khan, Gladys Knight and Roberta Flack, who would all have an influence on her as a singer and performer.

Her parents, however, encouraged her to stay in school and would not allow her to launch a professional singing career until she graduated from high school in 1981. When she did graduate, there seemed little doubt that she would immediately embark on a career in music. But in

Whitney's striking beauty and natural charm made her one of the most sought-after teen models

1981, she caught the attention of a photographer when she was singing with her mother at New York's Carnegie Hall. This chance encounter led to some prestigious work as a fashion model. Her striking beauty and natural charm made her one of the most sought-after teen models in the US. Whitney was one of the first Black women to appear on the front cover of *Seventeen* magazine. Appearances in *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour* and *Young Miss* followed, as did a commission for a Canada Dry TV commercial.

This was lucrative work and Whitney was clearly in demand, but a music career remained her main aim. In 1982, on the recommendation of her longtime friend Valerie Sampson, Whitney signed with Tara Productions and hired Daniel Gittleman, Seymour Flics and Gene Harvey as her managers. They in turn helped develop her recording career, placing her with producers of an album called *One Down*, by a band called Material. Whitney contributed the ballad 'Memories', a prog rock track by Hugh Hopper of Soft Machine. Revered rock critic Robert Christgau of *The Village Voice* proclaimed that her track was "one of the most gorgeous ballads you've ever heard". In 1983, Whitney also appeared on an album by actor, singer and songwriter, Paul Jabara, entitled *Paul Jabara and Friends*.

Given Cissy's music industry experience and the family connection to stars such as Aretha Franklin and Dionne Warwick, it's sometimes assumed that Whitney's career path was relatively easy. It wasn't. From the age of 14 to 19, she was out playing a whole range of nightclubs, lounge bars, talent shows and

ABOVE *Cissy Houston enjoyed a successful singing career with The Sweet Inspirations (pictured) and was a Grammy-winning solo artist.*

RIGHT *John Houston, served in the Second World War and became a businessman, later managing his daughter's career.*

Images Getty Images

OPPOSITE *Whitney was taught to sing by her mother. "You have three places to sing from," explained Cissy, "heart, mind, guts. She learned them all."*

RIGHT *Whitney with her cousin Dionne Warwick. Dionne's mother Lee is Cissy Houston's older sister.*

BELOW *Soul legend Aretha Franklin (centre) was a close friend of Cissy Houston, and became Whitney's 'honorary aunt'.*

showcases, pitting herself against other artists, all as competitive and as keen as she was to make it in the music business.

"This didn't happen overnight," recalled Whitney years later. "I was learning my chops and getting it together and growing up and I was also doing weekends with my mom at clubs."

Such dedication and hard work paid off. In early 1983, the 19-year-old Whitney was on stage at a New York lounge club with her mother when she was spotted by Gerry Griffith, an A&R representative from Arista Records. Griffith was impressed and urged Arista's founder and president, Clive Davis, to go and see her perform.

Brooklyn-born Davis was one of the most respected names in the music industry, dubbed 'the man with the golden ears'. He was a Harvard law graduate who joined Columbia Records in 1960 and in 1967 became president of CBS Records. That same year he attended the Monterey Festival, signing Janis Joplin after a performance that he described as "an epiphany". Over the decades, he went on to sign numerous big names such as Bruce Springsteen, Santana, Earth, Wind & Fire, Billy Joel, Aerosmith, Alicia Keys, and Jennifer Hudson.

Unlike some record industry executives, Davis had an empathy with his artists and a respect for their creative ambitions. They in turn respected him. When he walked into the club on the corner of Broadway and Bleecker St one evening in mid-February 1983, to watch Whitney Houston, he knew he had stumbled upon a star.

"The first time I saw her singing in her mother's act [was] in a club called Sweetwaters," recalled Davis in the ABC News special *Superstar: Whitney Houston*. "She came out to sing and it was such a stunning impact to hear this young girl put such fire and such life into this song. It really sent the proverbial tingles up my spine."

In Davis, Whitney had arguably found the one person who had the vision, talent, contacts and integrity to steer her career in the right direction and take it up to a whole new level. He, in turn, had found a star in the making with a mercurial talent. From that point on, things would move quickly for the 19-year-old 'Nippy'. The lounge bar days were over. She was already taking her first steps towards global superstar status.

From the age of 14 to 19, Whitney was out playing a whole range of nightclubs, lounge bars, talent shows and showcases

Images Getty Images

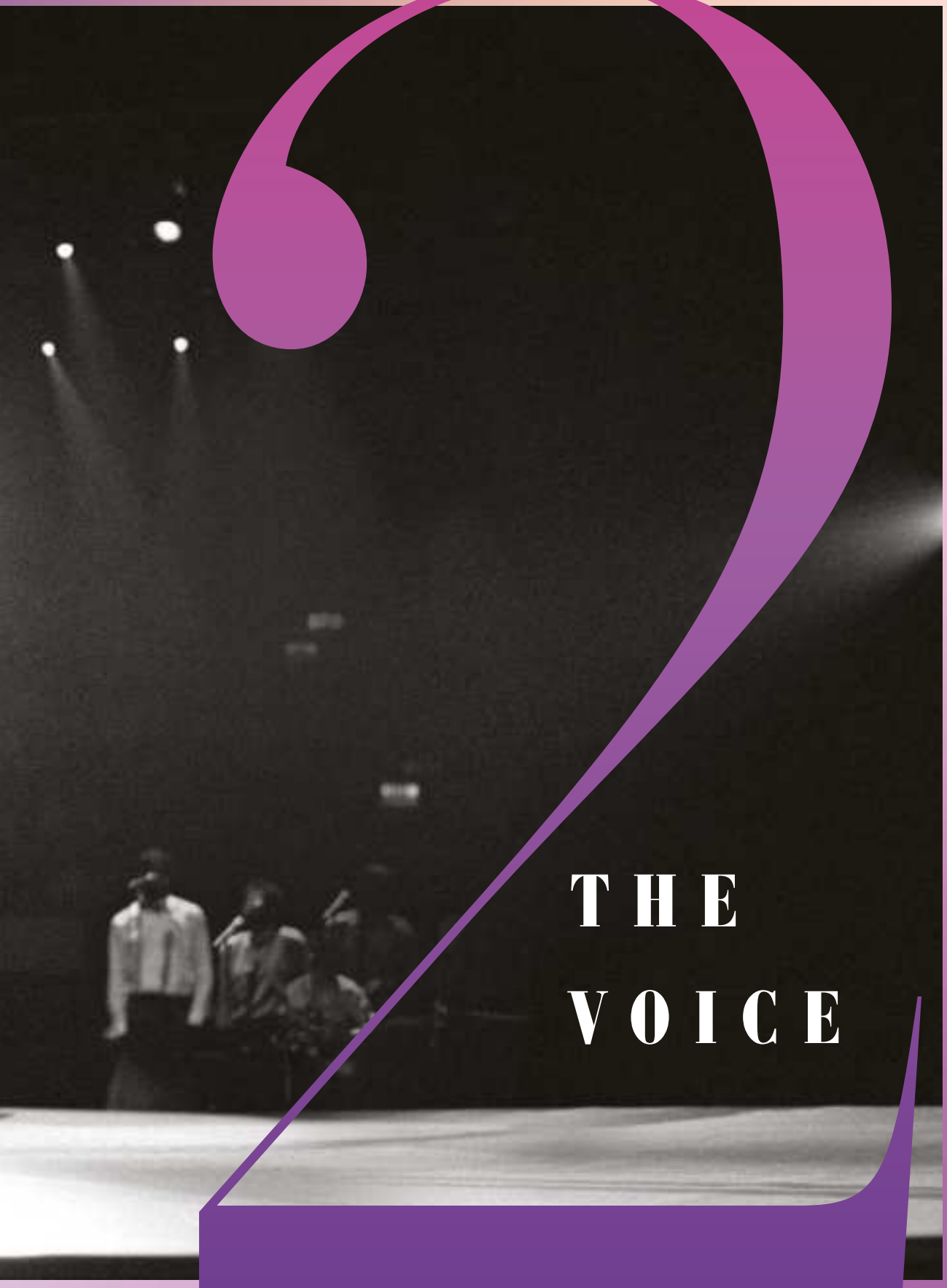
Image: Earl Roberts/Getty Images

ONE MOMENT IN TIME

Clive Davis and Whitney Houston pictured at the signing of her contract with Arista Records on 10 April 1983. Davis – who had previously signed Aretha Franklin and Dionne Warwick – first saw Houston perform with her mother in a New York City nightclub, and was so impressed that he immediately offered her a worldwide record deal.

CHAPTER 2

Image Getty Images



2

THE VOICE

THE Voice

Over the course of three studio albums and two world tours, Whitney Houston established herself as an astonishing vocal talent without equal

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

Image Getty Images

At mid-afternoon on 23 June 1983, the 19-year-old Whitney Houston walked out onto the soundstage of *The Merv Griffin Show* at the Hollywood Palace Theatre at 1735 N Vine Street, Hollywood for her first ever TV performance to a national primetime audience.

As appearances go, it was unorthodox. She had no new album or single to promote. No one had heard of her. She hadn't recorded a note of music since signing a record deal with Arista Records two weeks previously. What she did have was an abundance of raw talent, star quality and a champion in the form of Arista Records founder Clive Davis, a hugely respected music industry legend, who had the clout to get an unknown artist on national TV with just one phone call.

"It was an opportunity to signal her special talent," said Davis, who was interviewed by Griffin before the performance. He heaped praise on Whitney, stating that she was the next in the lineage of iconic singers such as Lena Horne and Dionne Warwick. "If the mantle was to pass to someone who has got an incredible range of talent but guts and soul at the same time, it would be Whitney Houston in my opinion," Davis told Griffin. "I mean you either got it, or you don't have it. She's got it."

Seconds later, Whitney walked onto the stage, wearing an off-the-shoulder purple top with puffed sleeves and a long black skirt. She looked excited but assured as she stood at the mic and the band struck up the opening bars of the song 'Home' from the musical *The Wiz*.

In the course of the next few minutes, Whitney immersed herself in the song, wringing out every ounce of emotion, moving from the most delicate, hushed delivery and falsetto, through to gritty soulfulness and the full-on exhilarating power and vibrato for which she would become renowned.

After the final vocal crescendo, the audience erupted with applause, as the beaming Whitney bowed humbly and applauded them. Then Clive Davis – looking for all the world like the proudest dad on the planet – walked on stage with Griffin to congratulate her. "You won't forget that name," bellowed Griffin above the ongoing ovation, "Whitney Houston!"

As TV debuts go, her performance that day is up there with the very best, a star-making event that proved beyond doubt that she had the confidence, charisma and sheer talent to carry it off in the big league. Very few unproven young artists have been singled out for such a concerted major record label

TOP (SEQUENCE) *Whitney performing a rendition of 'Home' for her television debut on* The Merv Griffin Show *in June 1983.*

ABOVE *Rather than rushing into making Whitney's debut record, Clive Davis took his time to make sure she had a good team of producers and quality material to work with.*

Whitney immersed herself in the song, wringing out every ounce of emotion

push within just weeks of being discovered. In the months and years that followed she would scale ever dizzying musical heights with her unique and astonishing vocal talent.

The next step for Whitney was to start recording her debut album. Many producers and songwriters initially turned down the offer to collaborate with her. It took a year and a half for Gerry Griffith, the A&R representative who had recommended Whitney to Clive Davis, to amass enough suitable songs for the album.

One of the first to commit was Michael Jackson's older brother, Jermaine. He and Whitney had already recorded a duet on an emotive piano ballad called 'Nobody Loves Me Like You Do' for CBS soap opera *As the World Turns*, and they collaborated on a second song for the album, a breezy mid-tempo R&B track 'Take Good Care of My Heart'. Jackson was also involved on a third track on the album, a brisk dance pop track called 'Someone for Me', which he produced.

ABOVE RIGHT *Whitney pictured during the production of the 'How Will I Know' music video.*

MIDDLE *Clive Davis on stage with Whitney at the Limelight nightclub in New York City, 1984.*

RIGHT *On the set of* As the World Turns *with Jermaine Jackson.*

Images Getty Images, Alamy, The Merv Griffin Show (video stills)

TOP *In February 1986, Whitney won her very first Grammy award, which proved to be the first of many in her career.*

MIDDLE *Pictured at the American Music Awards in January 1986, where she won for Favorite Soul/R&B Song and Video.*

ABOVE *Whitney embarked on her first global tour in July 1986, performing 53 shows across the world.*

Another welcome addition was revered musician, singer, songwriter and producer Narada Michael Walden, who produced 'How Will I Know', an upbeat dance pop track, which would eventually become her second No. 1 US single.

Then of course there were the ballads, such as 'Saving All My Love for You', a sultry and restrained track, which became her first song to top the US charts and also reached No. 1 in the UK, Ireland and Canada. But the real show-stopping ballad on the album was 'Greatest Love of All', a monumental song, which pretty much wrote the blueprint for the power ballad divas that would follow.

Gradually, some big hitters from the R&B scene came on board. Producer Kashif Saleem co-wrote 'Thinking About You', a dance/R&B track that Stephen Thomas Erlewine of AllMusic described as "one of Whitney Houston's purest pop pleasures". Kashif also brought a sophisticated melodic feel to the sultry R&B-tinged-track 'You Give Good Love'. This was the song that really kick-started Whitney's career. It was also the one that heralded a colossal and unprecedented shift at the heart of the US music industry.

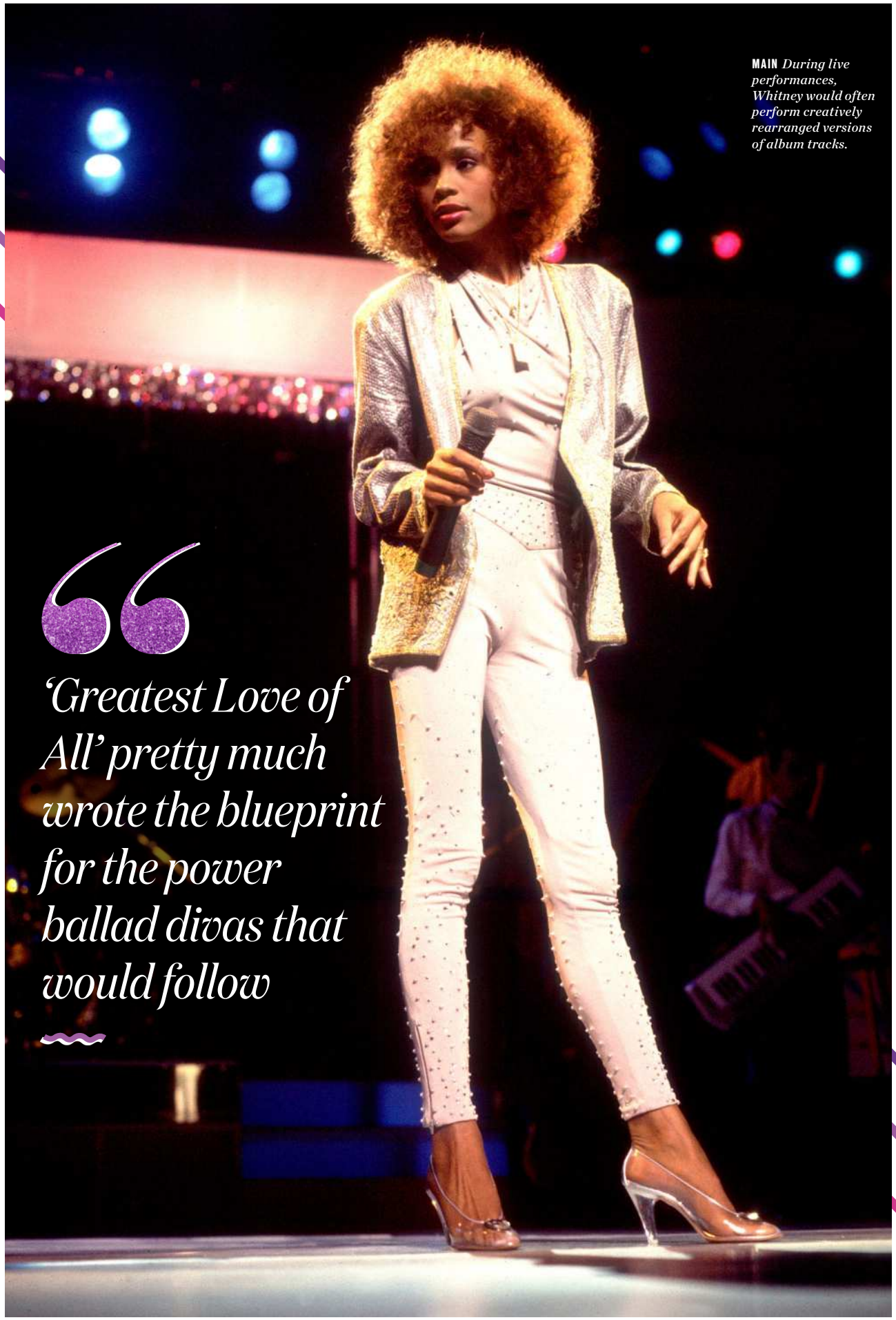
The American music industry had always been notoriously segregated. In 1983, this all began to come to a head when the new 24/7 music video station MTV was accused of not playing music by Black artists. This was an issue highlighted by David Bowie when he was interviewed by Mark Goodman, one of the first VJs on MTV. The interview was primarily to promote Bowie's new album, *Let's Dance*. But towards the end of the interview, Bowie casually completely changed the subject. "There seem to be a lot of Black artists making very good videos that I'm surprised aren't used on MTV," he said.

"We have to try and do what we think not only New York and Los Angeles will appreciate," responded Goodman, "but also some town in the Midwest that would be scared to death by Prince, which we're playing, or a string of other Black faces."

"That's very interesting," said Bowie sardonically, fixing the VJ with a glare, "isn't that interesting?"

But one artist was about to transform the marketplace for Black artists. In January 1983, CBS Records released 'Billie Jean', the second single from Michael Jackson's landmark album *Thriller*. The song topped the *Billboard* 100 charts for seven weeks. MTV placed the video for the track on heavy rotation. It was a landmark moment.

"After *Thriller* and the emergence of Michael Jackson, MTV becomes a much more integrated place for music," said music writer Alan Light in the ABC News documentary special,



MAIN *During live performances, Whitney would often perform creatively rearranged versions of album tracks.*

'Greatest Love of All' pretty much wrote the blueprint for the power ballad divas that would follow

Images Getty Images, Alamy

Superstar: Whitney Houston, "and it's into that world that Whitney enters."

Whitney Houston's self-titled debut album was released on Valentine's Day, 14 February 1985 and grew steadily over a period of a year to climb to the No.1 spot in the *Billboard* charts. It was a fully-rounded and assured debut, which showcased the astonishing vocal talent of the 21-year-old former model with the girl-next-door charm. Across the album, Whitney evoked the soul of Aretha Franklin, the smooth R&B groove of Chaka Khan and the pop sensibilities of Diana Ross.

Critics loved the album. *Rolling Stone* called her "one of the most exciting new voices in years" while *The New York Times* called the album "an impressive, musically conservative showcase for an exceptional vocal talent". 'You Give Good Love' was chosen as the lead single to establish her in the R&B charts. The track crossed over to the mainstream market, giving the album its first major hit, which climbed to No. 3 in the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. This fuelled the success of the album, as did a tour of US nightclubs.

The album would go on to sell 22 million copies worldwide. It topped the charts in many countries such as Canada, Australia, Norway and Sweden, and peaked at No. 2 in the UK, Germany and Switzerland. It would go on to be included in *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of 500 Greatest Albums of All Time. The final single 'Greatest Love of All' (a cover of the 1977 George Benson track originally recorded for the Muhammad Ali biopic, *The Greatest*) became her biggest hit yet, peaking at the top of the charts and making the album the first by a female artist to yield three No. 1 hits in the *Billboard* Hot 100.

But it was her third US single, the funk-orientated 'How Will I Know' that changed everything. Within two weeks of its release, MTV put it on heavy rotation and introduced Whitney to a whole new audience. By 1986, she was appearing on major TV chat shows, such as *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* and *Late Night with David Letterman*.

At that year's Grammy Awards, Whitney was nominated in four categories – including the prestigious Album of the Year award – and won one for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance for the single 'Saving All My Love for You'. "I was very excited, it felt good," said the 23-year-old Whitney, when asked about winning her first Grammy, in an interview on *Good Morning America*. "I love most songs, I love ballads very much but I love doing uptempo things you know. As long as a song has real meaning, some real depth to it, I like to sing whatever tempo it is, I don't care."

TOP *Whitney's string of chart-dominating hits throughout the 1980s made her one of the decade's defining artists.*

ABOVE LEFT *At the AMAs in January 1987, Whitney won awards in five of the six categories she was nominated for.*

ABOVE RIGHT *The North American leg of the Moment of Truth World Tour made over $20 million.*

TOP *Performing 'Greatest Love of All' at the Grammys in 1987.*

ABOVE LEFT *In 1988, Whitney became the first artist to achieve seven consecutive Number 1 hits – a record that still stands.*

ABOVE RIGHT *The popularity of artists like Michael Jackson and Whitney in the 1980s led to MTV including more videos by Black artists in their rotation.*

In July 1986, she embarked on her first world tour, The Greatest Love World Tour, which encompassed the US, Europe, Australia and Japan, and ended in December 1986. The shows consisted of Whitney on a fringed, round stage in the centre of the arenas and theatres, with a nine-piece band and four backing vocalists positioned behind her.

Whitney thrived in the live setting and was soon rearranging most of the songs. This impressed the musicians in her band as it demonstrated she was not merely content to deliver note-for-note reproductions of the album versions but to dig deep and wring further emotion out of a song by changing its sound, structure and feel.

> *Whitney evoked the soul of Aretha Franklin and the pop sensibilities of Diana Ross*

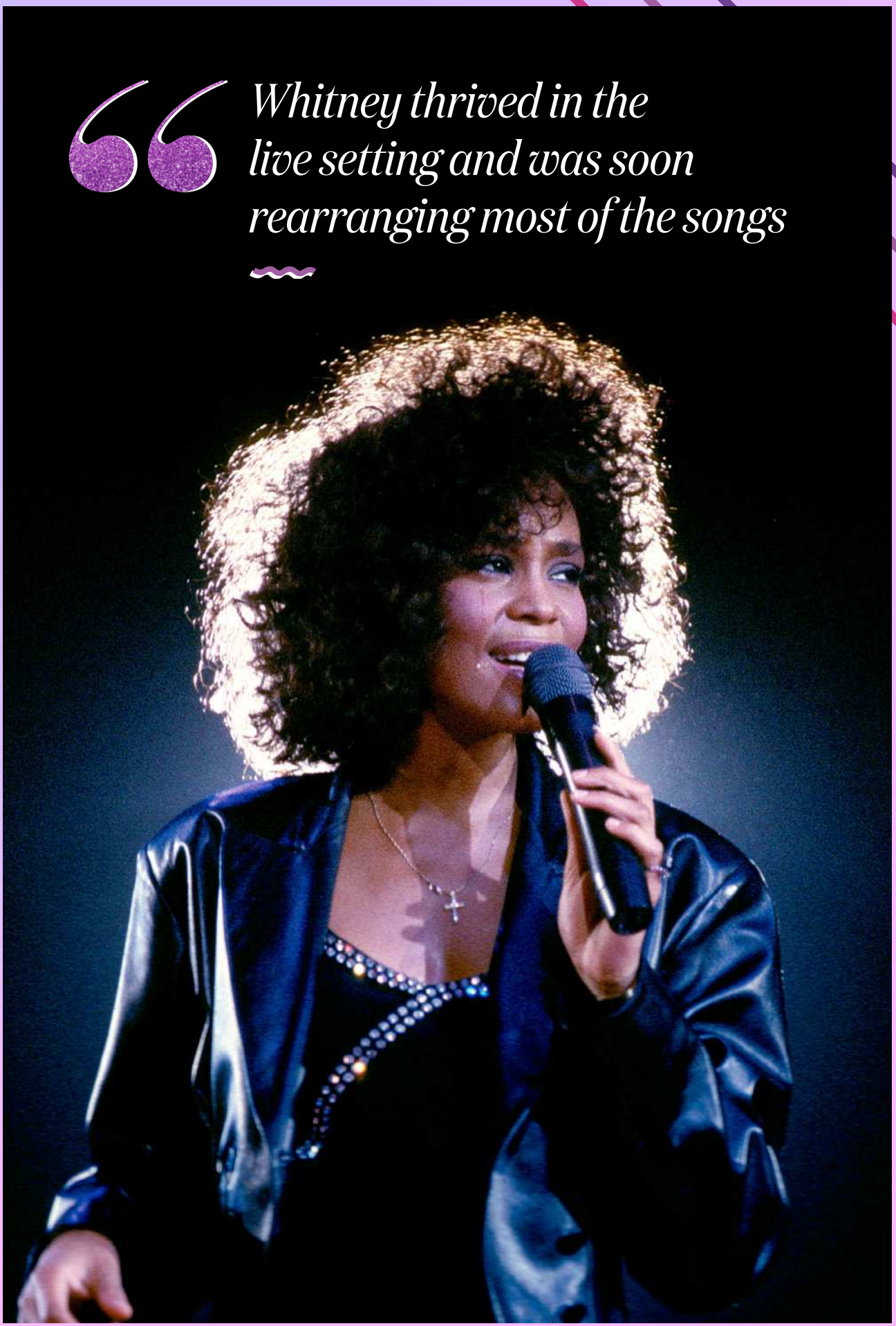
On the live version of 'You Give Good Love' she would slow the track down to emphasise its soulful feel, shifting it more towards a gospel track, breaking the whole thing down with her backing singers, On 'Saving All My Love for You', Whitney arranged the song with a bluesy jazz inflection, more reminiscent of Billie Holiday.

Critics cited 'He, I Believe' as one of the show's highlights. This was a song she learned from her mother which melds the gospel songs 'He Is' and 'I Believe'. Another highlight of the show was 'I Am Changing', a cover of Jennifer Holliday's show-stopping *Dreamgirls* song. Whitney would conclude her set with a slowed down, soulful version of 'Greatest Love of All'.

Throughout late 1986 and early 1987, Houston began work on her second album, *Whitney*. This was the record that would really cement her status as an international star. Here, she shifted her sound

Images Getty Images, Alamy

Whitney thrived in the live setting and was soon rearranging most of the songs



ABOVE *Whitney at the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute concert at Wembley Stadium in June 1988.*

RIGHT *Whitney with Stevie Wonder, Babyface, LA Reid, Narada Michael Walden and Clive Davis.*

towards mainstream pop. Whitney and Clive Davis, who was by now executive producer, recruited some star producers: Michael Narada Walden, Michael Masser, Jellybean Benitez and Kashif. The result was a landmark release, which exceeded the already high expectations of her record label, Arista Records, and went on to sell 13 million copies.

The album yielded four No.1 singles: 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)', 'Didn't We Almost Have It All', 'So Emotional' and 'Where Do Broken Hearts Go'. It was a stunning collection of tracks, ranging from euphoric dance-pop, soulful R&B grooves and full-on power ballads. This chart-topping run made Whitney the first female act to achieve four No.1 hits from one album.

Following the release of the album, she embarked on her second world tour, an epic undertaking entitled the Moment of Truth World Tour. This tour began on 4 July 1987 in Tampa Stadium in Florida, and took in over 140 dates across the US, the UK, Europe, Australia, Japan, and ended on 20 November 1988 with the last of three shows at Hong Kong Coliseum. Whitney played to over half a million fans and it was the highest grossing tour by a female artist that year. The North American leg alone grossed $24 million.

In a review of one of Whitney's concerts, Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* attempted to sum up her appeal. "Ms Houston may be a new kind of pop singer for the video era," he observed, "an encyclopedic, restless virtuoso. She has absorbed the soul and pop styles of everyone from Aretha Franklin to Barbra Streisand to Diana Ross to Al Green; she can deliver a gospel rasp, a velvety coo, a floating soprano and a cheerleader's whoop."

The success of her two world tours and two studio albums left Whitney an extremely wealthy woman. In 1988, *Forbes* magazine ranked her as No. 8 in the highest-earning entertainers list. She was the highest-earning African-American woman overall.

By 1988, she was a vocal supporter of the then imprisoned anti-apartheid activist and ANC leader, Nelson Mandela, and she cancelled an Italian show on 11 June 1988, to perform at a historic concert in honour of Mandela's 70th birthday. The aim of the event was to increase global awareness of the imprisonment of Mandela by the South African apartheid government.

The concert took place at Wembley Stadium in front of 72,000 fans, and Whitney headlined a huge bill of performers and speakers that included Stevie Wonder, Whoopi Goldberg, Harry Belafonte, Dire Straits, Sting, Al Green, Bee Gees and Eric Clapton. The concert was broadcast to 67 countries and an

OPPOSITE *Whitney's Moment of Truth World Tour ran for over 147 dates between July 1987 and November 1988.*

ABOVE *Whitney, Cissy and Gary Houston performing together at the 1988 American Music Awards.*

Images Getty Images

ABOVE *At the 1989 AMAs, Whitney won Favorite Female Artist in both the Pop/Rock and Soul/R&B categories.*

audience of 600 million. It is believed the event had a significant impact in raising awareness of the South African apartheid regime and speeding up Mandela's release from prison.

By 1989, Clive Davis and Arista Records could not have hoped for a better outcome from their investment in Whitney Houston. She was a global pop superstar, an icon who had dominated the mainstream pop charts. But on 13 April 1989, Whitney and her label got a taste of the downside of this success.

At that year's Soul Train Music Awards, Whitney and Clive Davis were whisked VIP-style into the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. But during the ceremony, when her face came up on a giant monitor screen alongside other award nominees, a significant section of the audience began to boo her.

By then, Whitney had two Grammys, 11 American Music Awards, achieved the biggest-selling debut album by a female artist in history and a record-breaking seven consecutive US No. 1 singles. Despite all this, some Black radio stations refused to play her records, arguing that her music was simply "not Black enough". So when she turned up at the Soul Train Music Awards, nominated for Best R&B/Urban Contemporary Single for 'Where Do Broken Hearts Go', people let her know exactly how they felt.

"To the Black ear, these records were not natural R&B records," said Arista promoter Doug Daniel in Nick Broomfield's 2017 documentary *Whitney: Can I Be Me*. "So for the Black audience the perspective in the community was that Whitney had sold out [...] When her picture came across the screen there was this massive booing."

In retrospect, it's not surprising. From the moment she signed with Arista Records at the age of 19 she was marketed towards a mainstream, and predominantly white, audience. "Anything that was too 'Black-sounding' was sent back to the studio," Arista's head of promotion says in Broomfield's film. "We didn't want a female James Brown".

Not surprisingly, the experience of being booed was a profound shock for Whitney. "You have to sit there and be cordial and smiling, like everything's okay," recalled Whitney. "'Oh my God, they're not booing me are they?' Sometimes it gets down to being not Black enough for them you know? Not R&B enough. You're very pop. The white audience has taken you away from them."

While she attempted to shrug it off, it cut deep. Some have even suggested that the incident set in motion a sequence of changes in her life that ultimately led to her death.

"That moment of being booed on Soul Train was not only tough for Whitney. It was devastating," says saxophonist Kirk Whalum, who was part of Whitney's touring band. "It was emotionally devastating. I don't think she ever recovered from it. It was one of those boxes that was checked, that when she ultimately perished, it was because of those boxes and that was a big one."

The experience also influenced her decision to pursue a grittier more R&B direction on her third studio album *I'm Your Baby Tonight*. Whitney wanted more creative control and so became

Despite her success, some Black radio stations refused to play Whitney's records, arguing that her music was simply "not Black enough"

executive producer on this release. From the outset, the album exudes a harder, more defiant sound, with elements of new jack swing and contemporary R&B. Hip songwriting/production duo LA Reid and Babyface were brought on board for four songs, including the title track, a joyous upbeat slice of dance pop, which was a global hit, topping the charts in five countries, including the US. Revered musician, songwriter and producer Narada Michael Walden was brought in for the album's other No. 1 US hit, a heartfelt ballad 'All The Man That I Need', which sold over 4 million copies.

Whitney's third album was released on 6 November 1990, while it was an international success, the record received mixed reviews in the press. Most of the acclaim was showered on the two ballads 'All The Man That I Need' and the track 'Miracle', which peaked at No. 9 in the US when released as a single.

As the 90s dawned, Whitney Houston could look back on the previous decade as a period of astonishing achievement, when the videos for her relentless succession of hits dominated MTV's rotations during its first decade on air. After establishing her screen presence in this video format, and revelling in the creative process, she would turn her attention to the big screen for a project that would catapult her to even greater commercial heights. It would be eight years before she released another studio album. But this would be a record that would stand as the absolute pinnacle of her prodigious and enduring talent.

TOP *John Houston – who became his daughter's business manager – posing with Whitney for a portrait in 1989.*

ABOVE *Performing 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' at the 1988 Grammy Awards.*

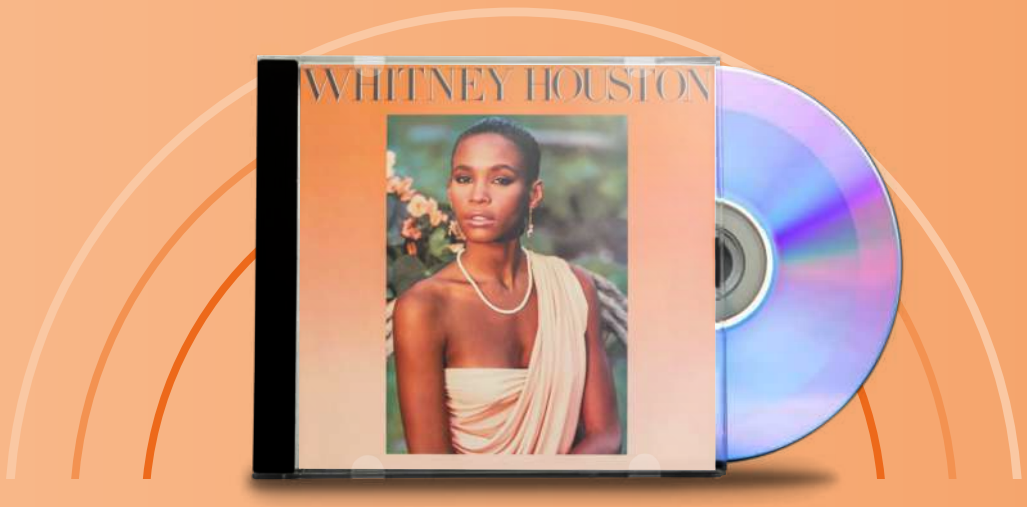
BELOW *Whitney and Clive Davis, circa 1989. By the end of the 80s, Davis' investment in Whitney had proved a wise one.*

Images Getty Images

Image Getty Images

MAKING RECORDS, BREAKING RECORDS

Houston pictured in the recording studio in March 1987, during the production of her second album. Whitney *was released in June 1987 and went on to produce seven consecutive Number 1 singles – surpassing the achievements of The Beatles and The Bee Gees, who previously held the joint record with six consecutive chart-topping hits. Houston also made history with* Whitney *by becoming the first female artist ever to debut at Number 1 in the US album charts.*



WHITNEY HOUSTON

February 1985

Whitney Houston's debut album was a strong, assured release, yielding three hit singles and launching her to superstar status

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

1 You Give Good Love

This soulful ballad was the lead single from the album and surprised Whitney's label Arista Records by crossing over to the mainstream market and peaking at No. 3 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart. The song was written for Roberta Flack by La Forrest 'La La' Cope, who became frustrated waiting to hear back from Flack, so performed it live for Whitney and her producer Kashif. "Before I ended the song," LaLa told *Billboard* magazine, "she [Whitney] picked up on the lyrics and was singing it along with me." The song attracted criticism for being "sexually suggestive", views that Whitney refuted. "The songs that I sing don't fall into that category," she said, "so I don't think about it at all."

2 Thinking About You

Digital synth sounds permeate this dance/R&B-infused track, which was written by Kashif Saleem and La Forrest 'La La' Cope. Although it wasn't promoted as a single, the song became a Top 10 hit on the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop chart in the US when eventually released as the third single from the album. AllMusic editor Stephen Thomas Erlewine called the track "unheralded" and concluded that "it remains one of Whitney's purest pop pleasures".

ABOVE *At the American Music Awards in January 1986, where Whitney won the awards for Favorite Soul/R&B Song and Video.*

3 Someone for Me

Heavy swirling synths, slap bass and robotic backing vocals feature in the mix of this fun-soaked 124bpm dance-pop track, which is slickly and empathetically produced by Jermaine Jackson. At nearly five minutes long, it could arguably have benefitted from a tighter edit, but it's a joyous track with an edgy, jagged feel, that underpins the lovelorn lyrical sentiment: "I'm here alone on a Friday night / Waiting here beside the phone / The TV, radio and me / Really ain't been getting along."

4 Saving All My Love for You

An absolute masterclass in pop balladry, penned by

‘Saving All My Love for You’ is an astonishing vocal performance

MAIN *Whitney performs at Park West, Chicago, during her debut promotional tour for* Whitney Houston *in October 1985.*

Images Arista Records (album cover), Getty Images, Alamy

As always, Whitney glides through the octaves with effortless style

ABOVE *Jermaine Jackson produced three songs and performed two duets on Whitney's debut album.*

BELOW *Whitney with host Peter Illman during her first TV appearance in Germany, June 1985.*

BOTTOM *The album was certified platinum in several countries around the world.*

Michael Masser and Gerry Goffin. The track was originally recorded in 1978 by Marilyn McCoo and Billy Davis Jr and focuses on a woman who is awaiting the arrival of her married lover. It's an astonishing vocal performance. Whitney evokes just the right level of emotional vulnerability while ascending through whole octaves to deliver powerful, dynamic high notes. The song reached No. 1 in the UK, US and Canada. For Whitney, the lyrics rang particularly poignant. "I was going through a terrible love affair," she said in James Robert Parish's biography *Whitney Houston 1963-2012: We Will Always Love You* "He was married, and that will never work out for anybody. Never, no way."

5 Nobody Loves Me Like You Do *(with Jermaine Jackson)*

Despite Whitney Houston's mercurial talent, many producers and songwriters initially turned down the offer to collaborate with her. One of the first to commit was Michael Jackson's older brother, Jermaine. This track, originally performed on the CBS soap opera *As the World Turns*, was recorded as a duet by Jermaine and Whitney, and at the time of recording she was unknown. It's a powerful and emotive piano ballad, with tinges of country. But as a review of the album by *Billboard* magazine pointed out: "Its main issue, however, lies in the uneven vocal combination: in

every duet portion, Houston's voice outshines Jackson's."

6 How Will I Know

Released as the third single from the album, this song was written by the crack team of George Merrill and Shannon Rubicam and produced by Narada Michael Walden, who would team up again in for the smash 1987 hit 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)'. This is an upbeat dance-pop track with a dynamic vocal performance, which drives home the song's irrepressible hook. The track was a breakthrough single for Whitney and the second to reach No. 1. As always, she glides through the octaves with effortless style.

7 All at Once

This is the song that first introduced fans to the kind of power ballad that Whitney Houston would become renowned for. It was released as a single in European countries and Japan. Keyboards intro the track and set the scene as the vocals enter the mix over a Gm7 chord: "All at once / I finally took a moment / And I'm realising that / You're not coming back / And it finally hit me / All at once." The song demonstrates the dexterity of Whitney's vocals, and her ability to drop down to a whisper from an epic chorus while retaining the emotion of the song.

8 Take Good Care of My Heart *(with Jermaine Jackson)*

The second duet with Jermaine Jackson is a breezy, upbeat offering and a far more assured collaboration than 'Nobody Loves Me Like You Do'. Here, Whitney's vocal does not eclipse Jackson's and it's a far more balanced performance overall. Essentially, this is mid-tempo R&B track, with slick production, heaps of 80s digital instrumentation, touches of strings and two strong vocal performances.

9 Greatest Love of All

As with many of Whitney's most renowned songs, this is a cover, although from the first few bars of her performance, she makes it her own. Written by Michael Massner (music) and Linda Creed (lyrics), the track was recorded by George Benson in 1977 as the theme song for the Muhammed Ali biopic *The Greatest*. This is the first song on the album that isn't about romantic love. It's a monumental track, with the descending bass on the D-C#-Bm-E7 chorus elevating the purity of Creed's lyrics to real heights: "I decided long ago / Never to walk in anyone's shadows / If I fail, if I succeed / At least I'll live as I believe / No matter what they take from me / They can't take away my dignity."

10 Hold Me *(with Teddy Pendergrass)*

After the euphoric heights of 'Greatest Love of All' the album concludes with this duet, featuring R&B legend Teddy Pendergrass. Unsurprisingly, the presence of two such stand-out voices on the same track is something of an event. It's a slow, sweeping ballad, which runs to six minutes in length. There's a calm, resigned feel to the song, which makes it an apt choice as the final track. It became the first single release of Whitney's career when it was released as a single from Pendergrass' 1984 album *Love Language*.

Images Getty Images, Alamy

LEFT *In February 1986, 'Saving All My Love for You' earned Whitney her first Grammy win for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance.*

ABOVE *Clive Davis and Whitney celebrate the album's success.*

WHITNEY

June 1987

On her second album, Whitney Houston transitioned her sound towards mainstream pop and created one of the best-selling albums of all time

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

1 I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)

This opening song was the lead single and the track that really kick-started the phenomenal success of the album. It was written by George Merrill and Shannon Rubicam, and "loved, produced and arranged" by Narada Michael Walden – the same team of people behind Whitney's 1985 hit 'How Will I Know'. This is a euphoric dance track, compellingly catchy and powered along by fat, funky synth-bass, digital handclaps and spirited keyboard fanfares. According to Walden, Whitney came up with the "Don't you wanna dance, say you wanna dance" part in the studio. When released, the single exceeded even the high expectations of her label, topping the charts in 17 countries, including the UK, US, Australia and Germany.

ABOVE *At the 1988 AMAs, Whitney won Favorite Pop/Rock Female Artist and Favorite Pop/Rock Song for 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)'.*

2 Just the Lonely Talking Again

First released by The Manhattans in 1983, this Sam Dees-penned track is yet another song given fresh life by Whitney. It's a warm, lush sound with a staggered groove, anchored by fluid, soulful bass lines and tasteful brushes on the snare. As the chorus opens up, expansive backing vocals and muted guitar motifs enter the mix. It's a nice, spacious feel and Whitney seems at ease, riffing along high up the scale in a call-and-response with the sax. At its core, this is soul music. As the track goes on, the vocal performance becomes evermore adventurous and there's a sense that this is Whitney really pushing, exploring and revelling in her abundant vocal ability.

3 Love Will Save the Day

This song was the fifth single from the album and was produced by John Benitez – better known as Jellybean – a musician, songwriter, DJ, remixer and music producer who also worked with names such as Madonna and Michael Jackson. Sonically, you can feel the shift here on the album. There's a joyous, uptempo urgency and a more

MAIN *To promote the album, Whitney embarked on the Moment of Truth World Tour in 1987-88.*

> *'Didn't We Almost Have It All' is a full-on power ballad, with Whitney really pushing her voice to extremes*

Images Arista Records (album cover), Getty Images

minimal spikiness to the sound. Released as a single on 5 July 1988, it went Top 10 in eight countries. In 2012, *Entertainment Weekly* ranked this song No. 20 in its list of 25 best Whitney Houston songs, noting that "the Miami bass and spicy horns on this high-BPM dance-pop workout pointed to Houston's willingness to experiment and evolve".

4 Didn't We Almost Have It All

Whitney became the first album by a female artist to debut at Number 1, and sold over 10 million copies in the US. It also yielded six singles, four of which went No. 1 in the US. This was one of them, the second single which was released on 13 August 1987. Producer Michael Masser co-wrote the song with Will Jennings, a lyricist from East Texas who told SongFacts that the track was "about wishing for reunion with someone, and making the case for it by recalling past good times". It's a full-on power ballad, with Whitney really pushing her voice to extremes as the song progresses. According to Jennings, it took longer than any song on the album to complete – almost two years. "Because he [Masser] was producing the record, he wanted to really nail it down," explained Jennings. "He kept feeling it wasn't finished."

5 So Emotional

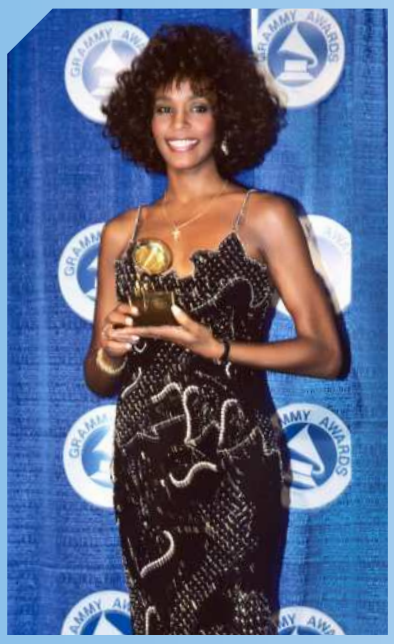
Another single that reached No. 1 and another to feature the production prowess of Narada Michael Walden. The song was written by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly, a songwriting duo best known for penning Madonna's 'Like a Virgin', Cindi Lauper's 'True Colours' and The Bangles' 'Eternal Flame'. Walden throws everything at the track and, in keeping with the times, most of it is digital – epic reverb-drenched digital drums, skittering synths, dipping and diving synth bass. A neat drop-out section is followed by a scorching, overdriven guitar solo. There are even edits of laughter from Whitney in the mix. In the midst of it all, she delivers a powerful, soaring vocal performance: "I get so emotional baby / Every time I think of you / I get so emotional baby / Ain't it shocking what love can do."

6 Where You Are

The pain of separation is the focus of this song: "Tossing and turning in my sleep / I can't take being without you / I'm gonna catch the next plane out / I got to get to where you are." It's the one song on the album to be produced by acclaimed multi-instrumentalist, songwriter, composer and producer, Kashif. There are some well-judged production touches, notably the warmer, acoustic elements, which provides a welcome contrast to

MAIN *Whitney's Moment of Truth World Tour was 1987's highest-grossing tour by a female artist.*

It's a graceful and intimate end to a landmark album



TOP *The album's lead single, 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)', earned Whitney her second Grammy Award for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance.*

ABOVE *Whitney and her mother Cissy pictured on the ABC Special* Superstars and their Moms *in May 1987.*

the era's all-digital tastes. Whitney delivers a heartfelt vocal take, which really highlights the textural nuances of her voice.

7 Love Is a Contact Sport

There's a neat, spacious groove to the intro of this track, which features stark percussive effects and some thick, squelchy synth bass, before the whole track segues into a straightforward 4/4 skip with high-end synth stabs, walking bass and a sax solo. "You've been avoiding me," begins Whitney, "Like a cat trying to dodge a dog / I never see ya shine / You're as cold as the London fog." It's an outright catchy pop track, with a driving 175bpm beat and a brisk, buoyant feel.

8 You're Still My Man

The second track penned by Brill Building veterans Michael Masser and Gerry Goffin. Digital flute and strings intro this power ballad, which leans heavily on minor chord variations to convey its plaintive feel. There's a powerful descending chorus and a melodic bassline melding the whole thing together. Whitney's vocal has an aching, imploring tone, which complements the emotional power of the track: "On the day that you left me / You said you had no regrets / There's a bond between us / That hasn't broken yet."

9 For the Love of You

A song first recorded and released in 1975 by The Isley Brothers. When covered by Whitney it earned her Best Female R&B Vocal Performance at the 1988 Grammy Awards. This track was the B-side of 'So Emotional' and released on 12 November 1987. There's a nifty percussive passage on the intro before the track drifts into a jazz-soul groove, with saxophone lending it a reflective feel. There's a looseness at play here and it gives Whitney the opportunity to settle into the gentle groove for her heartfelt vocals.

10 Where Do Broken Hearts Go

Released as the fourth single from the album on 25 February 1988, this song was written by Frank Widhorn and Chuck Jackson. Smokey Robinson allegedly wanted to record the track but the two songwriters held it back for Whitney. Initially, she didn't want to record the song, believing that it had no special message to convey and even allegedly stated in a 2000 interview that she "hated the song". But Clive Davis, music industry legend and founder and president of Whitney's label, Arista Records, strongly believed it would be a No. 1 hit. He was proved correct. The track went on to top the charts in the US and Canada, and went Top 10 in four other countries.

11 I Know Him So Well *(with Cissy Houston)*

The album ends with a song from the musical *Chess*, by Tim Rice and ABBA's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus. Whitney recorded the track with her mother Cissy, an experienced gospel and soul singer, who worked with artists such as Aretha Franklin and Elvis Presley. As is the case with immediate family members, the timbre of their voices blend seamlessly when they harmonise here. Cissy's voice also brings a real grainy integrity to the song. It's a moving moment. The track was released as the sixth and final single from the album on 30 November 1988. It's a graceful and intimate end to a landmark album.

Images Getty Images

I'M YOUR BABY TONIGHT

November 1990

Whitney sheds her pop diva image and embraces a grittier R&B edge on the 'difficult' third album

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

1 I'm Your Baby Tonight

"The third album is always the hardest," said Whitney Houston in *The Raw & Uncut Interview* in 1991. "It's the expectation level that makes it hard to deal with." Anticipation was certainly high. Whitney was still haunted by the experience of being booed at the 1989 Soul Train Awards for aiming her music at a predominantly white audience. Hip songwriting/production duo LA & Babyface were brought on board for this album and from the outset, the album exudes a harder, more defiant sound, with elements of new jack swing and contemporary R&B. This title track bursts into life. It's a joyous and catchy upbeat pop track with a staggered groove, over which Whitney fully exploits her soaring vocal range. This was released as the lead single on 2 October 1990 and was a global hit, topping the charts in five countries, including the US.

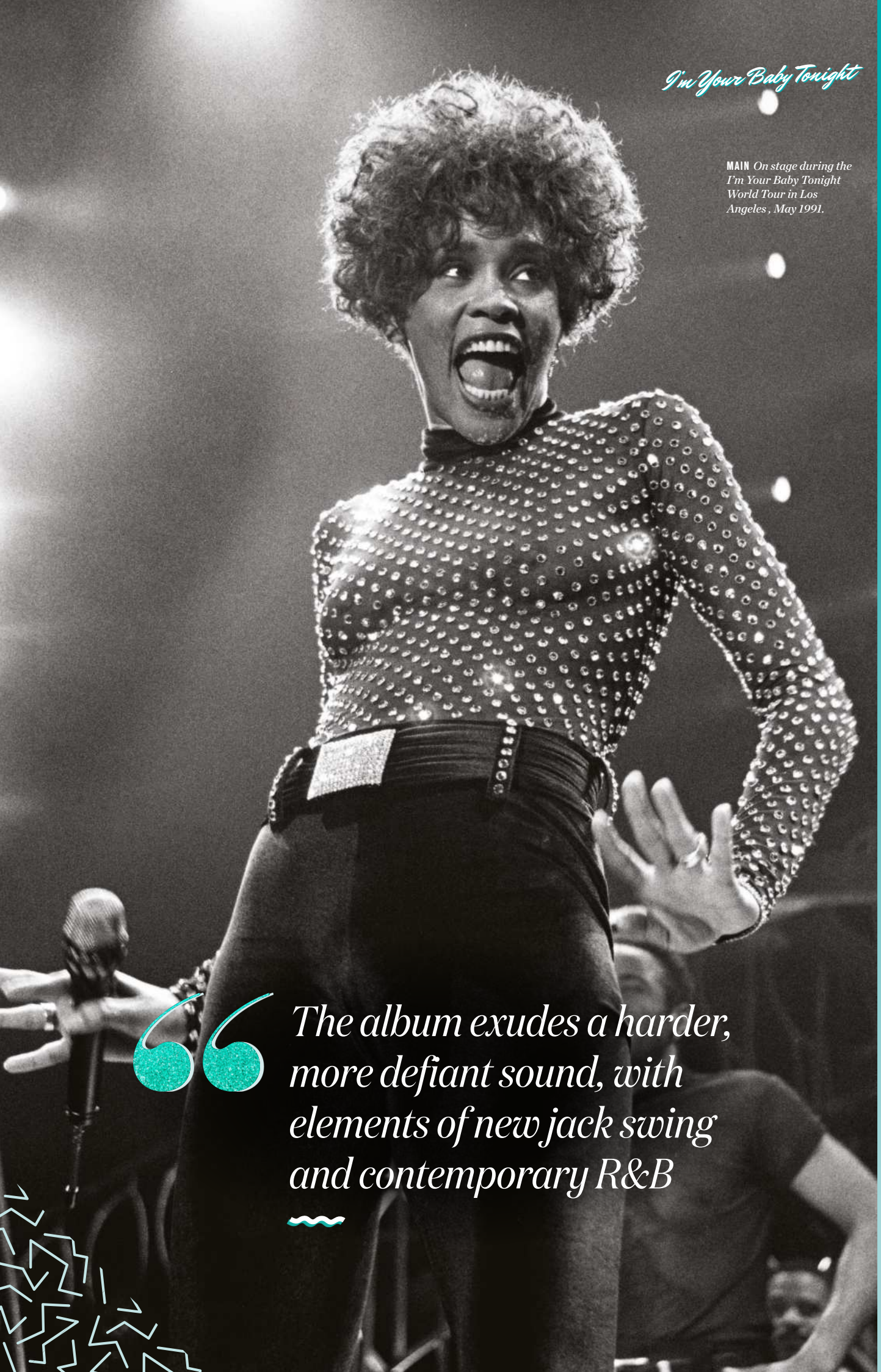
2 My Name Is Not Susan

Elements of the new jack swing sound pervade this track, a groove-laden number about a man who mistakenly calls his lover by his ex-girlfriend's name. When asked whether she had ever been called by a different name, Whitney's response was adamant. "I have never experienced lying in bed with someone and they go 'Oh Susan'," she laughed. "No, It's usually 'Oh Whitney'." The song was released as the album's fourth single, but only peaked at No. 29 in the UK charts.

3 All the Man That I Need

Sweeping strings and mournful saxophone grace this heartfelt ballad on which Whitney gets to demonstrate the warm purity of her voice and her sheer power in the higher register. Narada Michael Walden returns in the producer's chair and the result is classic pop

ABOVE *Whitney won in four categories at the Billboard Music Awards in December 1991, including Top R&B Album for* I'm Your Baby Tonight.



MAIN *On stage during the I'm Your Baby Tonight World Tour in Los Angeles , May 1991.*

> *The album exudes a harder, more defiant sound, with elements of new jack swing and contemporary R&B*

Images Arista Records (album cover), Getty Images

drama, a power ballad of the kind that became synonymous with Whitney Houston. The song was released as the second single from the album on 4 December 1990. It reached No. 1 in the US and Canada, peaked at No.13 in the UK and went Top 20 in six other countries. This song is one of the true highlights of the album.

4 Lover for Life

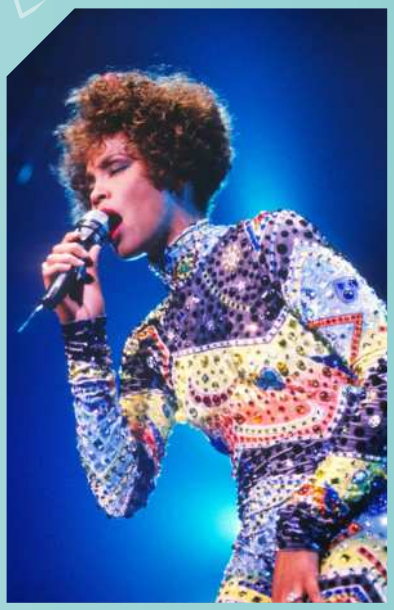
Sonically, this album is split between the more strident and danceable funk rhythms of Reid and Babyface, and the more ornate ballads and dance pop sound of the Walden-produced tracks. This song falls into the latter camp. Soft keyboards from Walter Afanasieff intro the song, while warm backing vocals provide a safe foundation for Whitney's breathy vocals. This is a classic album track, lacking a strong hook line but with a smooth and soulful groove that fits seamlessly in the sequencing of the record. Tasteful cadences on sax complement the chilled vibe.

5 Anymore

Babyface and LA Reid are at the production helm of this track, which picks up the album's pace with an upbeat attack. There's a real growl to Whitney's vocals and her phrasing is more pronounced and clipped as she ad-libs soulful flourishes throughout. At times her vocal inflections sound uncannily like Michael Jackson. It's a real foot-tapper of a track and the bouncy synth bass gives the whole thing a real skip.

6 Miracle

Synth strings and digital percussion pervade this track, a slow piano-based ballad that contrasts with the usual harder style of its producers Babyface and LA Reid. As ever, Whitney's vocals are impeccable – natural, controlled and with a real purity and warmth, which she retains even as she ascends to the higher notes in the register: "Nothing should matter / Not when love grows inside you / The choice is yours / There's a miracle in store." This track was the third single from the album. Released on 16 April 1991, it reached No. 9 in the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.



LEFT *The I'm Your Baby Tonight World Tour included 96 shows across the globe.*

ABOVE *Stevie Wonder duetted with Whitney on the track 'We Didn't Know', which he also wrote and produced.*

LEFT *Whitney poses on a motorcycle, similar to the album's cover shoot, at an event to promote the record in Munich, Germany.*

Whitney's vocals have a real purity and warmth

7 I Belong to You

Critics were quick to pick up on the distinct shift to a more R&B-inflected sound across the album. In a review of this, the fifth single from the album, Larry Flick from *Billboard* noted that Whitney "delivers a mature and restrained vocal within a lush, urban-angled swing/R&B arrangement" and he highlighted the song's "contagious chorus". It's a beautifully balanced track, with Whitney's warm vibrato

on the 'oohs' of the intro gliding over the chilled backing track. There's good use of space within the mix, with echo-drenched percussive effects bolstering the slow, steady groove.

8 Who Do You Love

Whitney's longtime friend Luther Vandross co-wrote this track and it features her mother Cissy on backing vocals. Once again, the style is new jack swing, a fusion of the rhythms and production techniques of hip-hop and dance pop. Whitney's long high-pitched 'whoooo's on the chorus are a sonic delight on this breezy, uplifting pop track. Squelchy digital synth stabs accentuate the rhythm and Cissy's backing vocals are a real high point.

MAIN I'm Your Baby Tonight *cemented Whitney's success as an international superstar. To date, it has been certified quadruple platinum in the US.*

9 We Didn't Know (with Stevie Wonder)

"Oh, it was the most incredible experience I've had," said Whitney in 1991's *The Raw & Uncut Interview*, about her collaboration with Motown legend Stevie Wonder on this track. "Stevie is just a musical genius. He knows exactly what he wants and has the best ears in the business." Wonder wrote and produced the track, which is about two good friends who realise they have romantic feelings towards each other. The duet is a gentle, mid-tempo ballad. Wonder delivers an impassioned lead vocal while Whitney contributes lush accompanying vocals and impromptu flourishes throughout.

10 After We Make Love

Brill Building songwriting veterans Michael Masser and Gerry Goffin co-wrote this sweeping power ballad. There's a big, spacious echo effect on Whitney's voice, and the richness of her mid-range timbre is stunning. Her voice positively soars as enigmatic strings, piano and sax ascend through the scale: "After we make love / I feel I've been touched by / All that heaven and earth will allow / All that matters is right here and now."

11 I'm Knockin'

Brass stabs and funky bass predominate on this track, which is the first song produced by Whitney herself. There's a natural looseness to the track, which was written for Whitney by Rhett Lawrence, Rickey Minor and BeBe Winans. Here, Winans, a gospel and R&B singer, also provides the vocal arrangement and sits in on backing vocals: "And if it's true I'm knockin' / Come open up the door / My heart's been right here waiting / For someone to adore." It's an instinctive vocal performance by Whitney who imbues the track with real feel. It's also a strong, upbeat ending to the album. W

Images Getty Images, Alamy

CHAPTER 3

Image Getty Images

SUPERSTAR

Superstar

The pop and R&B world of the Nineties belonged to an artist who dominated Hollywood and the charts with equal ease. You know her name...

WORDS DAVE SMITH

Image Alamy

When we look back on the sadly short life of Whitney Houston, too often we remember the controversies that dogged her private life and the circumstances of her shocking death. However, we should never forget that away from those tragic stories, Whitney built a hugely successful career for herself, carving out international stardom to a degree that few other musicians could ever attempt. Let's look back on her meteoric rise to iconhood here, particularly during the Nineties, the decade in which her star shone most brightly.

On 27 January 1991, Whitney – then 27 years old and at the peak of her considerable powers – kicked off the decade in fine style with a performance of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at the 25th Super Bowl at Tampa Stadium, Florida. Check YouTube to appreciate the spectacular nature of the show, but even with those visuals as a reference, you need to understand the significance of the annual Super Bowl to grasp what this meant for Whitney's career. It's a huge event, practically as meaningful to most Americans as Independence Day and Thanksgiving; the artists that sing the national anthem or play the half-time slot can have their careers made, or broken, by the reaction of the millions of viewers who watch them perform.

Whitney's stunning rendition of the anthem was subsequently released as a single and video, and became a Top 20 hit. She donated her revenue from the release to the American Red Cross Gulf Crisis Fund and was subsequently elected to the Red Cross Board of Governors. Despite her philanthropy, a certain amount of criticism was levelled at her because she sang along with pre-recorded vocals at the actual event. To clarify, she sang into a microphone that was turned off: she didn't mime.

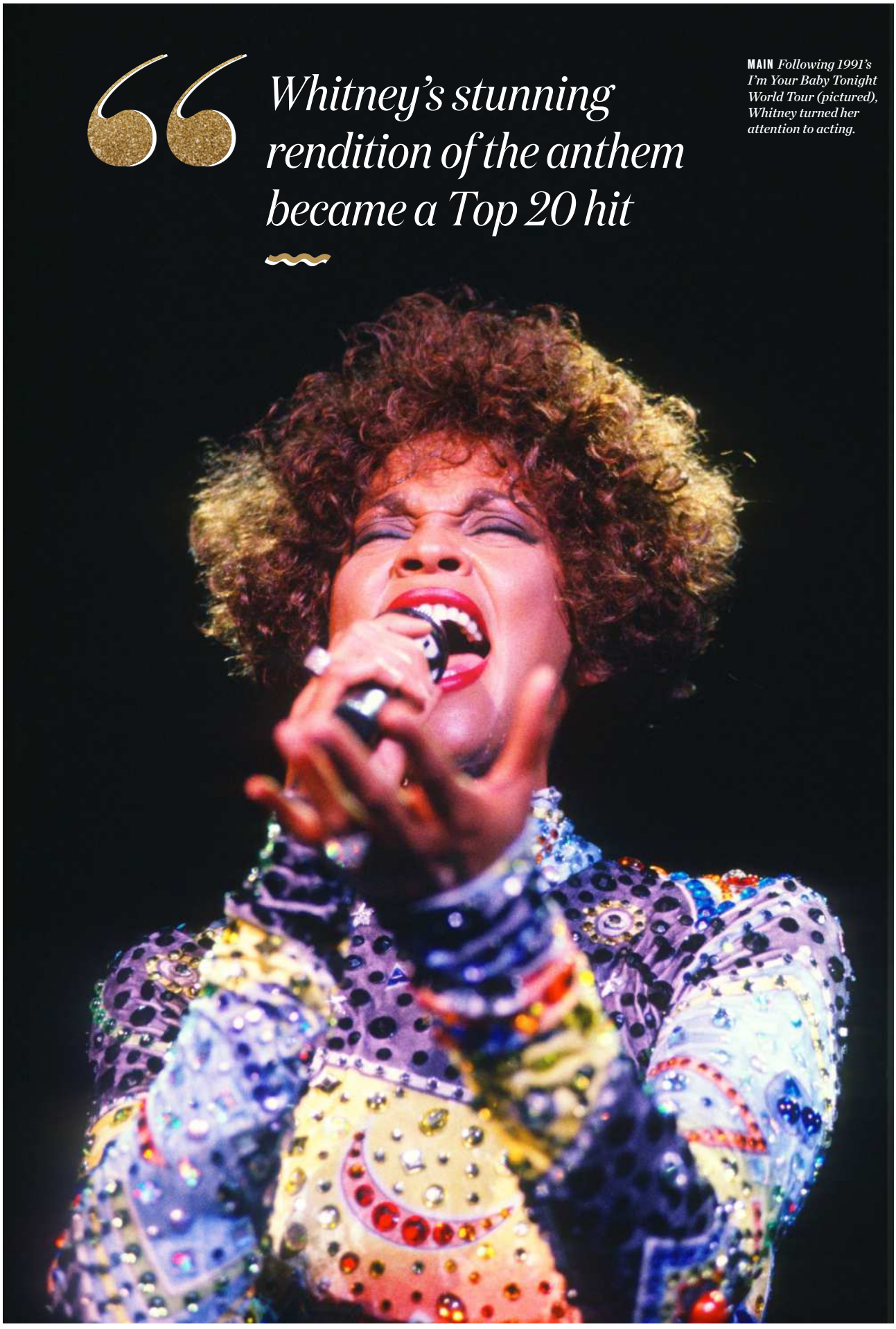
"This is not a Milli Vanilli thing," explained a spokesperson. "It was a technical decision, partially based on the noise factor [including a jet flypast]. This is standard procedure at these events." All these years later, of course, when bands routinely play along with backing music and vocals, this wouldn't attract much attention. When VH1 later included the performance on a list of moments that rocked TV, it was unclear whether it made the list because of Whitney's vocal skills or because of the associated controversy.

In late '91, Whitney and her team organised a Welcome Home Heroes concert, one of the first such events to take place on this scale, in

TOP *Whitney's spellbinding performance of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at the 1991 Super Bowl was seen by an estimated global audience of 750 million.*

ABOVE *In May 1990, Whitney was invited to the White House by then President George H W Bush to help promote the Youth Leadership Forum.*

Whitney's stunning rendition of the anthem became a Top 20 hit



MAIN *Following 1991's I'm Your Baby Tonight World Tour (pictured), Whitney turned her attention to acting.*

Images Getty Images

partnership with the HBO channel, which removed its usual subscribers-only block to allow the public to view it for free. The show raised funds for soldiers fighting in the Gulf War and was performed in front of 3,500 servicemen and women. At the time, it became HBO's most-watched broadcast to date.

1992 was the most important year yet for Whitney, both personally and professionally. As we cover in chapter 5 (page 86), she married Bobby Brown in July and they had a child the following year, by which point Whitney's fame had skyrocketed and she was close to being the most recognisable singer on the planet, with Madonna the only real other contender for that title.

So what happened? The 1992 blockbuster *The Bodyguard* is what happened, and with it, the song for which Whitney will forever be best known.

In case you haven't seen this epoch-defining movie, here's a quick summary: Whitney plays a megastar singer rather like her actual off-screen self – a fact which one or two snooty critics noted, saying that acting the part required little effort or skill – who is stalked by an obsessive fan. In response, a bodyguard played by Kevin Costner is hired to protect her, and slowly but surely they develop a relationship. Audiences swooned as Whitney and her hunky protector gradually got their act together, with the high point of the movie being the former's rendition of Dolly Parton's 1974 ballad, 'I Will Always Love You'.

The critics' lukewarm reviews of *The Bodyguard* meant nothing, because it was a truly immense

1992 was the most important year yet for Whitney, both personally and professionally

MAIN *In* The Bodyguard, *Whitney played Rachel Marron, a famous singer who clashes with the ex-Secret Service officer (Kevin Costner) hired to protect her.*

TOP LEFT *The film was originally going to feature a cover of Jimmy Ruffin's 'What Becomes of the Brokenhearted' instead of 'I Will Always Love You'.*

LEFT *At the 1994 AMAs, Whitney won eight awards – setting a new record for a female artist – most of which were for* The Bodyguard *soundtrack and its singles.*

TOP RIGHT *Whitney had initially planned to start with smaller acting roles. "I wanted to do some acting," she told* Rolling Stone*, "I never thought I'd be co-starring with Kevin Costner!"*

commercial success, bringing in a worldwide gross of $410 million against a budget of $25 million – a paltry sum in comparison to today's tent-pole pictures, but a significant wedge back in '92. It ended up as one of the top 100 grossing films in history, and turned Whitney into a viable property as a movie star, but even that isn't the point here. The real significance of *The Bodyguard* is that its soundtrack album, led by 'I Will Always Love You', was a genuinely huge success.

Take a listen to the original Dolly Parton version of the song. You may find yourself wondering what the fuss is all about, because this homely, understated version is pleasant without being particularly compelling, unless you're a huge Dolly fan, of course. Things might have turned out differently had Dolly accepted an offer from the late Elvis Presley to cover the song in the mid-Seventies, an offer she declined because Elvis' predatory manager Tom Parker demanded a share of her publishing rights.

"I said, 'I can't do that'," explained Dolly, years later. "Something in my heart says, 'Don't do that... He would have killed it. Then when Whitney's version came out, I made enough money to buy Graceland [the Presley mansion]."

Ms Parton wasn't far wrong in this claim. The soundtrack, released as *The Bodyguard: Original Soundtrack Album*, featured six songs recorded by Whitney and stayed at the top of the *Billboard* 200 chart for an astounding 20 non-consecutive weeks. In other words, the album came, left and came back again, with audiences buying it in such vast quantities that it could not be permanently unseated, for a period of five months.

The album was also one of the fastest-selling of all time. In the week of Christmas 1992 it sold over a million copies, becoming the first album to do so since modern sales scans were introduced. Eventually it went 18 times platinum in the US, selling over 45 million units worldwide.

Some of this success can be attributed to two more Whitney singles – a cover of Chaka Khan's 'I'm Every Woman' and an original song called 'I Have Nothing' – which made her the first female musician ever to have three simultaneous singles in the US Top 10. Make no mistake, though, the vast majority of *The Bodyguard* soundtrack's success was down to the instant and enduring popularity of 'I Will Always Love You'.

The song is essentially a beautifully polished, tastefully rearranged and massively turbocharged version of Dolly Parton's comparatively meek

Images Alamy, Shutterstock

LEFT *Whitney performing at the White House State Dinner held in honour of Nelson Mandela in October 1994.*

ABOVE *At the NAACP Image Awards in January 1994, Whitney won five of the six awards that she was nominated for.*

original. Arranged for maximum build, the song begins with Whitney's softly intoned a cappella lines, before the first "And I..." is accompanied by strings and the tension starts to build. Once the song hits full momentum, Whitney unleashes her abilities, uttering long, precise vowels that have inspired a million karaoke singers, most of whom come nowhere near her performance. A key change towards the end gives the song a final kick before it fades away to her final, understated 'Ooh'.

Critics and audiences flocked to buy the song and the accompanying album, which rapidly became the best-selling soundtrack album of all time. Whitney scooped the 1994 Grammy Award for Album of the Year for *The Bodyguard* soundtrack – becoming only the second Black woman to win this award since Natalie Cole won for *Unforgettable... with Love* two years before.

The press couldn't get enough of 'I Will Always Love You', even traditional rock magazines such as *Rolling Stone* heaped praise on it. The song was eventually certified diamond, making Whitney only the third woman to have such a success, and after it hit 20 million copies sold, it became the best-selling single of all time by a female solo artist.

The honours didn't stop there. The same year, Whitney won no fewer than eight American Music Awards, 11 Billboard Music Awards, three Soul Train Music Awards, five NAACP Image Awards, five World Music Awards and a sole Brit award from this side of the Atlantic. It seemed that Whitney's time was now – and the rest of the Nineties were hers for the taking. A long list of global live dates followed, dubbed The Bodyguard World Tour, to

> *Whitney's time was now – and the rest of the Nineties were hers for the taking*

reinforce the message that the Whitney Houston brand was here to stay.

An important milestone came in October 1994, when Whitney played a state dinner in the White House in honour of South Africa's new president, Nelson Mandela. She also performed three concerts in South Africa in Mandela's honour in front of over 200,000 people; she was the first major artist to visit the post-apartheid nation. One of the shows was broadcast on HBO and later released on VHS, titled *Whitney: The Concert for a New South Africa*.

It was obvious, after the industry-redefining *The Bodyguard*, that more acting roles would follow for Whitney. In 1995 she was seen alongside Angela Bassett, Loretta Devine and Lela Rochon in a rather more serious film, *Waiting to Exhale*. She explained that the role had appealed to her because the movie

MAIN *Whitney with her* Waiting to Exhale *co-stars Angela Bassett (right), Loretta Devine (lower left), and Lela Rochon (lower right), with director Forest Whitaker (centre).*

Images Getty Images, Alamy

TOP *In* The Preacher's Wife *(1996), Whitney plays Julia, the titular character whose family is helped by an angel (Denzel Washington).*

ABOVE *Whitney's fame was skyrocketing while she was also adjusting to life as a new mum after the birth of Bobbi Kristina in 1993.*

was "a breakthrough for the image of Black women, because it presents them both as professionals and as caring mothers".

The film performed well, taking over $80 million worldwide and gaining positive reviews, but perhaps its more important contribution was to the issue of racial equality. The NAACP recognised this and nominated Whitney for an Image Award for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture, ultimately giving the award to her co-star Bassett.

Like *The Bodyguard*, *Waiting to Exhale* was accompanied by a hit soundtrack, in this case a compilation of songs recorded by Whitney and other Black female artists. These included Mary J Blige, Brandy, Toni Braxton, Aretha Franklin and Patti LaBelle, and gave her more hit singles – 'Exhale (Shoop Shoop)', 'Count on Me' and 'Why Does It Hurt So Bad'.

A profile was now emerging of Whitney as a political activist, whether naturally or because her management arranged it this way: in 1995, her children's charity organisation was awarded a VH1 Honor for its work, and her next film, 1996's *The Preacher's Wife*, saw the NAACP give her the Image Award, again for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture.

More digestible than *Waiting to Exhale* but less romantic than *The Bodyguard*, Whitney's third movie role is perhaps her most memorable. She was paid an astonishing $10 million to play the part of a pastor's spouse, making her the highest-earning African-American actress in the US at the time. Once again, the soundtrack – a collection that sold over 6 million copies – became a huge hit. In fact, it was the biggest-selling gospel album of all time.

Whitney continued to work on awareness-raising projects into the late Nineties, founding a studio called BrownHouse Productions which had the stated aim of showing "aspects of the lives of African-Americans that have not been brought to the screen before." A notable early project was the 1997 made-for-television remake of *Cinderella*, in which Whitney played the Fairy Godmother. The production was an ABC special broadcast, attracted a TV audience of 60 million viewers and was nominated for seven Emmy awards, winning the trophy for Outstanding Art Direction in a Variety, Musical or Comedy Special.

Before returning to her career as a studio musician, in October 1997 Whitney performed a last major event for the HBO channel, titled *Classic Whitney: Live from Washington, DC*, a three-night engagement that raised over $300,000 for the Children's Defense Fund. Paying tribute to Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross and Dionne Warwick and

Her career had taken a successful diversion into both movies and activism

performing their hits, Whitney reinforced her position as a model for the advancement of Black music once again. The event was rewarded with the Quincy Jones Award for Outstanding Career Achievements in the Field of Entertainment at the 1998 Soul Train Music Awards.

The big picture, as Whitney entered the recording studio to work on her fourth album, was that her career had taken a successful diversion into both movies and activism over the previous eight years. She had performed beyond all expectations in both fields: returning to her musical career was simply the obvious thing to do at that point.

The new album, *My Love Is Your Love*, was released in November '98 and did not disappoint. Even though the mainstream musical world had moved on significantly since 1990's *I'm Your Baby Tonight*, a large fanbase remained loyal. Listeners enjoyed the updated, more modern production of the album, courtesy of Rodney Jerkins, Wyclef Jean and Missy Elliott. It sold 4 million copies in America and 11 million copies worldwide, and while this didn't compare with the huge performance of *The Bodyguard* soundtrack, those sales figures were better than respectable given Whitney's extended hiatus from the world of new music.

She rounded off the century with VH1's Divas Live '99 concert (alongside the likes of Brandy, Mary J Blige, Tina Turner, Cher, LeAnn Rimes and Chaka Khan), and her own My Love Is Your Love World Tour. Some dates of the latter were cancelled due to a case of bronchitis – which was no joke given

TOP *In the 1997 adaptation of* Cinderella, *Whitney played the fairy godmother alongside fellow singer Brandy in the title role.*

MIDDLE *Whitney was given the Quincy Jones Award for Career Achievement at the Soul Train Music Awards in February 1998.*

RIGHT *In June and July 1998, Whitney embarked on a European tour while in between projects – pictured here performing in Manchester, UK.*

Images Getty Images, Alamy

the immense strain of singing songs such as 'I Will Always Love You' every night.

A compilation album, *Whitney: The Greatest Hits*, was some solace to her fans in May 2000, selling 10 million copies worldwide. It offered reassurance to her followers that she was in touch with modern sounds, including dance remixes and new duets with Enrique Iglesias, Deborah Cox, George Michael and Jermaine Jackson.

At the end of 2002, Whitney released her fifth studio album, *Just Whitney*. For the first time, her sales were decent rather than spectacular. Perhaps it was the absence of producer Clive Davis, who had been ousted from BMG (Arista's parent company), that made the songs a little lukewarm. Maybe Whitney had simply worn the crown long enough, and fans wanted to see someone new. Either way, the four singles from the record made the most impact in the dance music field, possibly signalling public weariness with the soul-R&B formula that had so dominated the charts in the Nineties.

From this point on, Whitney's career began to describe a slow, but not catastrophic, descent. There was nothing wrong with 2003's Christmas LP *One Wish: The Holiday Album*, other than such albums rarely perform beyond a certain standard; indeed, it was certified gold.

In fact, she might well have begun an early comeback in 2004 and beyond, had it not been for a disconcerting reality TV show screened on Bravo, *Being Bobby Brown*. Much like the format's archetype *The Osbournes*, the idea was to reveal the inner workings of the Houston-Brown relationship, but the show did so with unflattering openness, leaving neither Whitney nor her troubled husband looking particularly good.

It's a shame to end this look-back at Whitney's most successful career phase on a low note, but that's life, and in the case of this most talented of musicians, life was not always kind. Still, as we'll see, Whitney wasn't done yet: more greatness was still to come...

LEFT *Whitney joined the VH1 Divas Live event in April 1999 alongside Tina Turner, Cher, Chaka Khan and other icons.*

ABOVE *Pictured at the Songwriters Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 2001, where Whitney presented the Howie Richmond Hitmaker Award to her cousin Dionne Warwick.*

OPPOSITE *'It's Not Right but It's Okay' won Whitney the award for Best Female R&B Vocal Performance at the Grammys in February 2000.*

Whitney's greatest hits album showed that she was in touch with modern sounds, including dance remixes and new duets

Images Getty Images

THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

In one of the defining moments of her career, Whitney Houston performed a rousing rendition of the national anthem during the 1991 Super Bowl. The song was infused with a more soulful, gospel feeling thanks to the innovative 4/4 arrangement (rather than the typical 3/4 waltz time), and it inspired a renewed sense of patriotism in a country that had recently entered the Persian Gulf War. To this day, it is widely regarded as the greatest performance of the anthem of all time.

Images Getty Images

MY LOVE IS YOUR LOVE

November 1998

On her fourth album, Whitney embraced R&B, hip-hop, neo soul, reggae and pop to deliver a work of real depth, invention and maturity

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

1 It's Not Right but It's Okay

Eight years after releasing 'I'm Your Baby Tonight', Whitney Houston returned with her fourth album, which as Stephen Thomas Erlewine of AllMusic put it "easily ranks as her best". Never before had Whitney experimented with such a broad range of sounds, and she enlisted cutting edge collaborators such as Wyclef Jean. Lauren Hill, Missy 'Misdemeanor' Elliott and Q-Tip to help her do it. It's the dance numbers that really bear fruit, as evidenced on this opening track, an innovative and assured slice of R&B/neo soul in which a woman confronts her partner about infidelity. It was the Thunderpuss remix that really ignited mainstream radio. The song reached No. 1 in the UK hip-hop/R&B charts and No. 3 in the UK Singles Chart. Across the Atlantic it peaked at No. 4 in the *Billboard* Hot 100.

2 Heartbreak Hotel *(with Faith Evans and Kelly Price)*

Whitney's defiant and wholly natural-sounding shift towards an R&B sound continues with spectacular and wholly natural-sounding results. *Billboard* magazine described this as "one of the most effective performances on the album". Whitney wears her heart on her sleeve on this soaring, emotional track, on which Evans and Price help fuel Houston's transition to a whole new generation of R&B fans. The track was released as a single on 15 December 1999 and was a major hit around the globe.

ABOVE *A young Bobbi Kristina can be heard saying "sing, mommy" in 'My Love Is Your Love'.*

3 My Love Is Your Love

Reggae influences pervade this Wyclef Jean-produced title track on which Whitney's voice glides over deep dub bass, skittering rhythms and a hip-hop beat. The song was written by Jerry 'Wonda' Duplessis, who was at the helm of Fugees' 1996 album *The Score* and also played bass. The song reinforces just how far Whitney had traveled creatively. It may have been an

MAIN *Performing at the 1999 MTV Europe Music Awards, where Whitney won the Best R&B category.*

Images Arista Records (album cover), Getty Images

eight-year gap, but everything about Whitney's sound on this album is edgy, relevant and contemporary, and lightyears away from her mainstream past.

4 When You Believe *(with Mariah Carey)*

This power ballad duet with Mariah Carey was a song from the 1998 Dreamworks musical *The Prince of Egypt*, written by Stephen Schwartz and Kenneth Edmonds. Carey included the song on her first compilation album as she said it was "a miracle" that she and Whitney got to sing together. Whitney, in turn, included it on this fourth album. "I enjoyed working with her very much," Whitney told *Business Wire* magazine in December 1998. "We just laughed and talked and laughed and talked and sang in between that... It's good to know that two ladies of soul can still be friends."

5 If I Told You That

Flowing jazz-inflected piano and swooping violins dominate the instrumentation and bring real tension to this compelling track, which is anchored by a deep hip-hop beat. It's a stellar vocal performance from Whitney, who brings spontaneity and energy to the song as she scats and riffs with soulful abandon. In 2000, a reworked version of the song was recorded with George Michael and included as the first single from her *Whitney: The Greatest Hits* album.

6 In My Business *(with Missy Elliott)*

"Hey, this is Whitney and Missy, y'all / Ninety-nine, uh / Hey Missy, can ya believe this girl? (Uh-uh, uh) / Misdemeanor." And so begins this slow burning slice of R&B, intro'd by scratching, sparse acoustic guitar, a rolling piano motif and shifting sub bass. When the two voices meet and harmonise, it's stunning and the frequent dips in the instrumentation only emphasise the vocal riches.

TOP *The duet 'When You Believe' with Mariah Carey won the Academy Award for Best Original Song in March 1999.*

ABOVE *Whitney performing at the 1999 BRIT Awards, where she was nominated for Best International Female Artist.*

RIGHT *'In My Business' and 'Oh Yes' featured Missy Elliott, who wrote and produced the tracks.*

7 I Learned from the Best

On its release, most critics concluded that the strength of this album lies in the up-tempo and mid-tempo tracks, arguing that the big production ballads such as this are less compelling. Despite such misgivings, this is a strong track, penned by revered songwriter Diane Warren, whose numerous writing credits include Cher's 'If I Could Turn Back Time'. There's a slight push to the kick drum on the first beat of the bar, which gives the song a nifty lilting groove. Whitney's voice is deep and rich, soaring effortlessly up to the epic chorus: "And so you know the way it feels to cry."

8 Oh Yes

Gentle Spanish guitar and flute feature on the intro of this song, which is the second collaboration on this record with pioneering writer, rapper and producer Missy Elliott, who features on backing vocals. It's a slow and slinky R&B/neo soul track, with some tasteful

MAIN *At the Grammy Awards in February 2000, Whitney won Best Female R&B Vocal Performance for 'It's Not Right but It's Okay'.*

Everything about Whitney's sound on this album is edgy, relevant and contemporary

production touches and a graceful feel. It also provides some inspired vocal moments from the two women whose voices seem to instinctively complement each other.

9 Get It Back

The narrative of this song focuses on a woman reminiscing about her relationship, wishing she could recapture the good times: "I remember how it was / And I know that for a fact / We were oh so deep in love / If we could just get it back." It's a bouncy, upbeat track co-written and produced by Rodney Roy Jenkins – better known as Darkchild – a producer, rapper and songwriter who also co-wrote 'It's Not Right but It's Okay'.

10 Until You Come Back

There's a raw, no-nonsense approach to this ballad, a soulful track in waltz-time with a tight and lean arrangement. Part of its power is its restraint. There's no intro, for example: the vocal comes straight in at 00:1 and this punchy, minimal approach leaves plenty of scope for Whitney's gritty and emotionally-wrought delivery. At its core, this is gospel and Whitney clearly connects with the character within the song.

11 I Bow Out

Strident violins, lightly-strummed acoustic guitar and skittering brushes on a snare form the bedrock of this track, which was written by Diane Warren. The light, hypnotic groove belies the emotional intensity of the lyrics: "Tired of playing this game / And I won't play it no more / And I won't take it no more / Through with being your fool..."

12 You'll Never Stand Alone

There's a slight rawness to Whitney's voice here which gives this slow, ponderous ballad an edge. This is another composition from renowned songwriter Diane Warren. It's a big, lush sound, but to her credit, Whitney avoids the obvious dynamic, opting for the less-is-more approach. As Stephen Thomas Erlewine of AllMusic put it: "The best ballads are where she restrains herself, delivering them with considerable nuance."

13 I Was Made to Love Him

Lauryn Hill produced this final 'hidden' track, co-written, recorded and released by Stevie Wonder in 1967. In an interview with MTV in 1998, Whitney spoke of the heavily-pregnant Hill's commitment to the track in the studio. "So she walks in there and I say, 'Lauryn, you okay?' She said, 'Oh, yeah. I'm ready to do this'. [Lauryn] stayed in the studio, I do believe, at least 20 hours after I had left. I kept calling her, saying, 'Lauryn, you have to go home'. She kept saying, 'No, I have to do this'." It's a beautifully organic-sounding track, with a rolling groove and Whitney unleashing an impassioned soul soliloquy.

Images Getty Images, Alamy

JUST WHITNEY

December 2002

While it lacked the fire and creative intensity of her previous studio record, Whitney Houston's fifth album still contained some sonic high points

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

1 One of Those Days

Four years after releasing the bold and compellingly creative *My Love Is Your Love* album, Whitney returned with her fifth studio release. By now, her personal life seemed to be increasingly chaotic, leading to rumours that she and husband Bobby Brown were dangerously addicted to drugs. The title of this album suggested a return to basics. Opener 'One of These Days' is a smooth and soulful mid-tempo R&B track, which samples The Isley Brothers' song 'Between the Sheets'. Lyrically it focuses on the urge to escape the stresses of everyday life. The track was the second single from the album and peaked at No. 72 in the *Billboard* Hot 100.

ABOVE *Whitney re-signed her contract with Arista records in 2001. At $100 million, it was the most expensive record deal for a female artist at that time.*

> *Whitney told* Billboard *that she had wanted to make a "very soul oriented" album*

2 Tell Me No

Acoustic guitar and timbales form the lilting intro of this track, which really kicks with the first chorus at 0:21. There are hints of classic 70s soul as Whitney sings

MAIN *There was no tour for* Just Whitney, *but Houston performed tracks from the album at several events, including the VH1 Divas Duets concert in Las Vegas.*

Images Arista Records (album cover), Getty Images

about prevailing against all odds and proving people, or a specific person, wrong: "I'm reaching for my dreams and you're so quick to say what I can't do / You criticise my actions but I don't see you standing in my shoes / I'm going the wrong way, I'm doing the wrong things / Every word just gives me fuel." Carlos Santana provides the searing lead break at 3:00.

3 Things You Say

On the release of *Just Whitney*, Houston told *Billboard* that she had wanted to make a "very soul oriented" album, something she felt was missing on the radio. To help her realise her vision, she collaborated with a raft of producers and writers, such as Kenneth 'Babyface' Edmonds and Kevin 'She'kspere' Briggs. Other contributors included rapper, singer and producer Missy Elliott, who was among the team helping to create this track, an enticing slice of heartfelt neo soul, with a slow, supple groove.

4 My Love *(with Bobby Brown)*

Stabs of electric piano intro this track, a collaboration between Whitney and her then husband – singer and songwriter Bobby Brown. Essentially, it's a song on which they celebrate their relationship, each outlining their own attributes and virtues: "Some girls just want to spend guy's money," begins Whitney, "...But you're lucky cause that ain't me." Brown then responds with his own take on what makes their union tick: "Most girls think guys are all the same / Not you so I can take the blame." There's a luscious, infectious groove here and an easy, spontaneous feel to their vocal performances, which blend seamlessly.

5 Love That Man

There are strong echoes of Shalamar-style 80s soul on this mid-tempo track, with its slick funk rhythm guitar and a mellifluous 'in the pocket' bassline. Not for the first time, Whitney brings Michael Jackson-style vocal inflections into play and there's a nice gritty sound to her vocal performance. Produced by Kenneth 'Babyface' Edmonds and Rob Fusari, the song was released as the second single from the album 20 May 2003 and peaked at No. 1 on the *Billboard* US Dance Club Songs chart.

6 Try It on My Own

The third single from the album and a track that is regarded by many as one of the album's highlights. *Billboard* cited it as the best track on the album, adding that it was "a classic Whitney ballad that pushes every diva button, from huge celestial notes to a creamy orchestral arrangement". There's a spaciousness within this ballad and the lyrics are a declaration of inner strength and independence: "I'm wiser now / I'm not the foolish girl you used to know / So long ago / I'm stronger now / I've learned from my mistakes which way to go."

7 Dear John Letter

As the title suggests, this song focuses on the process of writing a letter to tell someone the relationship is over and then pondering whether or not to send it: "Contemplating on the paper what I should do / On the fireplace, with the mail man / Should I tell you or should I hold it in / If my heart wasn't in it / Baby you could just forget it." Squelchy digital bass forms the instrumental backbone of this R&B-flavoured track, which darts around with a brisk groove within tight and minimal production.

8 Unashamed

There's a Latin influence to this song, which has a reflective and life-affirming lyrical tone: "Adding up my life, it totals all my dreams / I'm counting all my blessings and the gifts I have received / Still there's always someone, something to overcome / Took all my life to understand that I am what I am, who

LEFT *Whitney performing the lead single 'Whatchulookinat' at the MTV European Music Awards in Barcelona, November 2002.*

TOP AND ABOVE *According to Whitney, "This album for me is about surviving, raising a family, being a wife or girlfriend and all the challenges that go along with those things."*

MAIN *Bobby Brown duetted with Whitney on 'My Love' and also served as a producer on 'Whatchulookinat'.*

'Whatchulookinat' is a platform for Houston to refute criticisms that her life was spiralling out of control

ABOVE *A common theme across the album is Whitney's defiance in the face of the media criticism of her private life.*

I am / Unashamed." Instrumentally, it's a beautifully spacious production, with light flourishes of strings, piano motifs and Spanish guitar gracing the mix at key moments. Above it all, Whitney's heartfelt vocal shines.

9 You Light Up My Life

A cover of a Grammy-winning song that was released in 1977 by Debby Boone and which featured in a film of the same name. The Boone version spent ten weeks at No. 1, the longest run by a chart-topping single in the US in the 1970s. It's a big power ballad and if anyone has the ability to do it justice, it's Whitney. As Joe Pareles of *The New York Times* put it, in his review of this album: "Ms Houston's voice sails and spirals through breathy ballads, staccato constructions and big-build anthems; she's strategic and improvisatory at the same time."

10 Whatchulookinat

Released as the lead single, this track was co-written by Whitney and co-produced by her then husband Bobby Brown. Lyrically, it's a platform for her to refute criticisms that her life was spiralling out of control. She argues that gossip-mongers are "messing with my reputation / ain't you got no education... Don't even have a clue about what I'm facin'". It was poorly received by critics, but it's a highlight of the album, a strident R&B track, with a defiant message and Whitney's vocal performance is a tour de force. Commercially, the song reached only No. 96 in the *Billboard* Hot 100 but fared much better in other territories, reaching No. 13 in the UK Singles chart and Top 10 in Belgium, Canada, Greece, Portugal and Spain.

Images Getty Images

CHAPTER 4

Image Getty Images

4

THE COMEBACK

THE Comeback

How did the queen of R&B 'Look to You' in 2009? We examine Whitney's last burst of creative genius

WORDS DAVE SMITH

TOP *Prior to her 2009 comeback, Whitney's last major performance had been at the 2004 WMAs.*

ABOVE *While not working, Whitney still attended a few events, such as Clive Davis' pre-Grammy parties.*

First, a quick return to 1992. Bear with us here. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, we should question the significance of 'I Will Always Love You' to the wellbeing of Whitney Houston. As anyone can tell, it's a supercharged workout for the tremendously powerful vocal skills that she possessed at this point in her career. The song is deliberately arranged so that our focus is on those long, high notes in the word 'I' in the title phrase, as it should be: the sheer power, accuracy and focus of those notes – as well as the wavery melisma that accompanied their delivery – made Whitney a legend.

Not only that, the song ushered in a reality TV trend of female singers whose style was expected to include similar high-stress, long-duration notes, as if the world of singing was some kind of Olympic competition. For years, Whitney was expected to sing her signature song in precisely that muscular way, or audiences felt short-changed.

Now, apply this expectation to a singer who was in her forties. As any vocalist of a certain age will tell you, your singing range drops as the decades pass and your vocal cords age. Most singers manage this transition perfectly well, singing new material in a lower key and transposing older songs down a semitone or two. Older singers are usually credited with having a 'warmer', 'richer' or 'huskier' style, but their abilities are essentially unchanged.

Whitney, however, was not permitted this transition: her fans and her critics were not prepared to allow her to deliver songs such as 'I

Images Alamy, Getty Images

Other older singers didn't build their careers on technically superhuman songs like 'I Will Always Love You'

Will Always Love You' in a lesser – or at least lower-pitched – form than the original, not when they were paying hundreds of dollars to see her perform. No wonder she struggled, live and on record, and although we're not attributing her later drug abuse to this pressure, it can't have helped.

We mention all this as the backstory to her final album, *I Look to You*, which was released in August 2009. It's a perfectly decent record, with the two singles, the title track and 'Million Dollar Bill' both good examples of Whitney's late-career creativity. Fans generally liked it, sending it to Number 1 on the Billboard 200, but some reviewers sneered at her mature voice. *Slant Magazine* wrote, "her vocal cords are plagued by edema, her voice reedy and lacking the crystalline clarity it once possessed," an uncharitable assessment to say the least. Meanwhile, *Entertainment Weekly* remarked, "Houston's famous voice [...] now sounds husky and glottal, as if her vocal cords were sent through a washer-dryer cycle with a handful of small rocks."

More reasonably, AllMusic said, "Whitney can still sing, knowing when to wring emotion out of a phrase, knowing when not to push for the glory notes that she can no longer hit." Digital Spy added, "Her voice may not be as technically impressive as it was, but its new, more weathered tones have character." Do you think older singers such as Rod Stewart and Madonna get the same treatment from reviewers? No, but that's because they didn't build their careers on technically superhuman songs like 'I Will Always Love You'.

This was the context for the promotional appearances and subsequent world tour that Whitney performed after the release of *I Look to You*. The size of her UK fanbase made a slot on *The X Factor* an obvious opportunity, although her performance of 'Million Dollar Bill' – during which a strap in the back of her dress came undone – attracted some negative commentary due to

LEFT *The Nothing but Love World Tour suffered mixed reviews, with some performances overshadowed by vocal problems.*

RIGHT *Whitney on stage in New York City during a special on ABC's* Good Morning America *in September 2009.*

its slightly awkward nature. The Italian *X Factor* followed, as did the German TV show *Wetten, Dass..?* (*Wanna Bet..?*). Back in America, Whitney sang at the American Music Awards and on *Dancing with the Stars*, before receiving two NAACP Image Awards: for Best Female Artist and Best Music Video. She also received a BET Honors Award for her lifetime achievements, all of which meant that 2009 was a mostly successful year, so far.

Unfortunately, Whitney's world was shaken to its foundation in September with an interview – her first in seven years, reportedly – that she gave to Oprah Winfrey. It's worth viewing on YouTube if you haven't seen it already, simply because it gives an insight into where Whitney was, psychologically speaking, at this point in her life. The revelation that gained most attention was that she had used cocaine to the point of requiring stays in rehab, and while you can read more about this in chapter 5 (page 86), this personal struggle helps us to

LEFT *At the Grammy Awards in February 2009, Whitney took to the stage to present the award for Best R&B Album.*

ABOVE *In January 2010, Whitney was overcome with emotion as she received the Entertainers Award at the BET Honors for her achievements over the previous 25 years.*

Images Getty Images

The tour was more or less the last chance that Whitney had to perform in front of fans en masse

ABOVE *The Nothing but Love World Tour ran from December 2009 to June 2010.*

understand the nature of *I Look to You* a little more, as well as the tour that followed.

From December 2009 to June 2010, Whitney played 48 shows in Europe and Asia as well as in the southern hemisphere, with a couple of dates cancelled because of illness. The Nothing but Love World Tour was a success, grossing $36 million, but the media pounced on her failings as a singer and the disappointment of some fans, especially when she delivered substandard performances of 'I Will Always Love You'. Unable to hit the highest notes or hold the longest ones for their full duration, Whitney sang 'around' the notes, usually – but not always – in a musically accurate manner.

Some explanation for this came from voice coach Gary Catona, who worked with Whitney from 2005.

LEFT *On stage in Berlin, Germany during the Nothing but Love Tour in May 2010.*

TOP *The 2012 remake of 1976's* Sparkle *– one of Whitney's favourite films when she was young – would sadly be her final on-screen performance.*

ABOVE *Whitney with cousin Dionne Warwick and daughter Bobbi Kristina at the Pre-Grammy Gala in February 2011.*

As Catona told *The New York Post* seven years later, "She went out and performed when she was nowhere near ready... She was not a disciplined person in her personal life, and, away from our sessions, she was under the influence of so many forces. She allowed other people to control her."

Whitney's loss of vocal skills was more severe than most people realised, added Catona. "When I first started working with her in 2005, she had lost 99.9 percent of her voice. She could barely speak, let alone sing. Her lifestyle choices had made her almost completely hoarse. As her voice began returning, so did her confidence – she was so happy. If we'd been given the proper amount of time, we would have got her voice back to 95 percent of where she once was."

The tour was to be the last chance that Whitney had to perform in front of fans en masse, although a final creative outlet awaited her: an acting and production role on a remake of the 1976 film *Sparkle*. The movie – a tale of three sisters who rise to stardom in a singing group and encounter the pressures of fame and fortune along the way – starred the *American Idol* winner Jordin Sparks, and Whitney played her mother, an unsympathetic role in which she excelled.

Sparkle had been in development for many years, with Whitney acquiring the remake rights as far back as 2001. The lead role was originally reserved for R&B singer Aaliyah before her tragic death in a plane crash in 2001. Filmed in late 2011, the movie was released the following summer, by which time the world had irrevocably changed for Whitney's fans. It's a well-assembled, well-acted movie, in which Whitney herself delivers a solid performance.

A duet that Whitney recorded with Sparks called 'Celebrate' came out a couple of months before the movie – and proved to be the final single issued in her lifetime. It's a sadly inappropriate song title, given the events that surrounded it.

Images Getty Images, Alamy

Images Getty / Images

QUEEN OF THE NIGHT

Determined to put her highly publicised problems of the decade behind her, a defiant Whitney made a comeback at the February 2009 pre-Grammy gala, held in honour of her industry mentor, Clive Davis. For the evening's finale, she performed a short but sweet four-song set including renditions of 'I Will Always Love You', 'I Believe in You and Me', 'It's Not Right, but It's Okay' and 'I'm Every Woman'. The comeback performance came ahead of the release of I Look to You *that August, which was her first studio album in seven years.*

I LOOK TO YOU

August 2009

After a seven-year gap, Whitney Houston returned with a robust and stylish 'comeback', which would sadly be her last studio album

WORDS NEIL CROSSLEY

1 Million Dollar Bill

Arista Records founder and industry mentor, Clive Davis, took on the role of executive producer for Whitney's first album in seven years. One of his first decisions was to commission his latest protégé, Alicia Keys, to write the first single. It's a joyful, breezy, disco-infused ode to newfound love. Whitney was keen to collaborate with Keys after hearing her song 'No One'. "It was the only track that came on the radio that inspired me," she recalled. When Keys came up with 'Million Dollar Bill' Whitney's response was simply "Wow, incredible". The song reached No. 5 in the UK Singles Chart and No. 1 in the *Billboard* Dance Club Songs chart.

2 Nothin' but Love

A defiant and reflective account of Whitney's struggles over the previous seven years, referencing people who had and hadn't helped her along the way: "For anyone who tried to hate on me / Even the ones who tried to break me / Even the ones who tried to take me down." It's a stylish and sophisticated track, co-written and produced by Nathaniel 'Danja' Hills and Fernando Garibay. Like much of the album, it melds

> *By now, Whitney's vocals had a much huskier tone*

ABOVE *Fellow Clive Davis signee Alicia Keys penned Whitney's comeback single, 'Million Dollar Bill'.*

MAIN *At the 2009 AMAs, Whitney won the International Best Artist award, which "recognises artists whose popularity and impact cross national boundaries".*

Images Arista Records (album cover), Getty Images

disco and neo-soul and embraces contemporary elements. By now, Whitney's vocals had a much huskier tone, a significant change but one that only enhanced the soulful edge.

3 Call You Tonight

A melancholy R&B ballad written by songwriter Johntá Austin and the Norwegian-born NYC-based production duo, Stargate. Lyrically, the song focuses on not having enough time for romance. Whitney's vocal is perfectly judged, shifting from tight, emotive phrasing on the verses to big, open melody lines on the chorus: "So I'm gonna call you tonight / I will baby, just as soon as I get time alone / I'm gonna call you tonight, I will baby / Just as soon as I get home."

4 I Look to You

This piano ballad was written by the now disgraced R Kelly and released on 23 July 2009, one month ahead of the album's release date. An enigmatic descending chord sequence underpins the vocal refrain on the verse. Lyrically, the song focuses on her willpower to survive. "The last several years spiritually, this song says all I wanted to say," said Whitney at one of the listening parties for the album. "You have to reach for a higher strength, you have to reach deep inside yourself, spend time with yourself to make some corrections that go beyond your own understanding and lean on a higher understanding. For me [this] song puts it all in check."

> *"The full-on power ballad reminds the listener just what a force Whitney Houston actually was"*

MAIN *The Nothing But Love Tour in 2009-2010 was Whitney's first world tour in a decade.*

5 Like I Never Left *(with Akon)*

Senegalese-American musician Akon co-wrote and produced this track. It's a sunny, upbeat song about trying to rekindle a relationship. "Cause it's a cold world / When you are out there all alone / So many times that I wanted to just pick up the phone / And tell you ooh, baby / I miss your love." At times, the pronounced vocal production makes it difficult to discern whether it's Whitney or Akon singing but it almost doesn't matter. The track has an easy charm to it.

TOP *Whitney at the 2009 Grammys where she presented an award to Jennifer Hudson.*

MIDDLE *Dionne Warwick joined Whitney for a duet during Clive Davis' pre-Grammy Gala in February 2011.*

ABOVE *Many fans were delighted by Whitney's late-Noughties comeback.*

6 A Song for You

A song written by Leon Russell for his eponymous 1970 debut album, which was covered by artists such as Donny Hathaway, Ray Charles and The Carpenters. Here Whitney and her producers – the Norwegian Stargate team and Harvey Mason Jr – transform the track into an upbeat disco number. From the outset she delivers a full-on emotive vocal performance, traversing scales with ease. Her voice was undoubtedly grittier from the ravages of the years, but she could still wring emotion out of a phrase like few others, as evidenced on this pained plea for forgiveness from an estranged lover.

7 I Didn't Know My Own Strength

Twenty-five minutes into the album and this full-on power ballad reminds the listener just what a force the classic 90s Whitney Houston actually was. The track was co-written by Whitney and Diane Warren, and produced by David Foster. The lyrics recount how Whitney survived her darkest hour, after the breakdown of her marriage and the media speculation about her drug use. The song seemed to reflect a spiritual epiphany. "I know from whence my help cometh," she said in an interview with Oprah Winfrey. "And I know it's strong within me. If I ever get low, I get weak, I know where I can turn to. I love the spirit of God so much."

8 Worth It

At the listening party to promote the album ahead of its release, Arista Records founder and music industry legend Clive Davis highlighted this song, picking out Dionne Warwick in the audience and saying "Dionne, this one floats like you float", referring to the track's engaging lilt. It's a mid-tempo R&B track, produced by Eric Hudson, whose credits include Mary J Blige and Kanye West. There's an enticing groove and a stellar bass line, swooping and enhancing throughout.

9 For the Lovers

This thumping dance track was written by Claude Kelly and Timbaland engineer Marcella Araica, while Nathaniel 'Danja' Hills produced the track. Danja told *Billboard* magazine he recalled hearing the song before executive producers Larry Jackson and Clive Davis gave it to him to produce. "I always liked it," Danja said, "It made me feel like the 'Africa' song [by Toto]... When we finally got to the zone we started to design it for her. We did it in a day. It was a spur-of-the-moment type of thing."

10 I Got You

Echo-drenched vocoder effects intro this track, before a pure, silken high note from Whitney enters the mix. There's a laconic feel to the song with its lolloping groove and reggae-infused rhythm. This is the second collaboration on the album with Akon, who co-wrote and co-produced the track with Giorgio Tuinfort. Once again the lyrical focus is love: "I'll hold you up... when you just can't stand / I'll make you fly... when you think that you can't / By my side forever... baby that's the plan / I'll be your everything."

11 Salute

The now disgraced R Kelly penned this track and his vocals also feature here. Lyrically, it's aimed squarely at a departing lover who has done her wrong: "No more tears to shed / What you expecting me to beg / Well I'm not I'm done." Fans were surprised by a swear word, which was bleeped out in the mixing process, but this is Whitney with a real edge and it works. That said, she was never truly at home at the cutting edge of R&B and this album re-establishes her as a pop-soul diva without equal. The album promised much but tragically, it would be her swansong – the final studio album of her illustrious career.

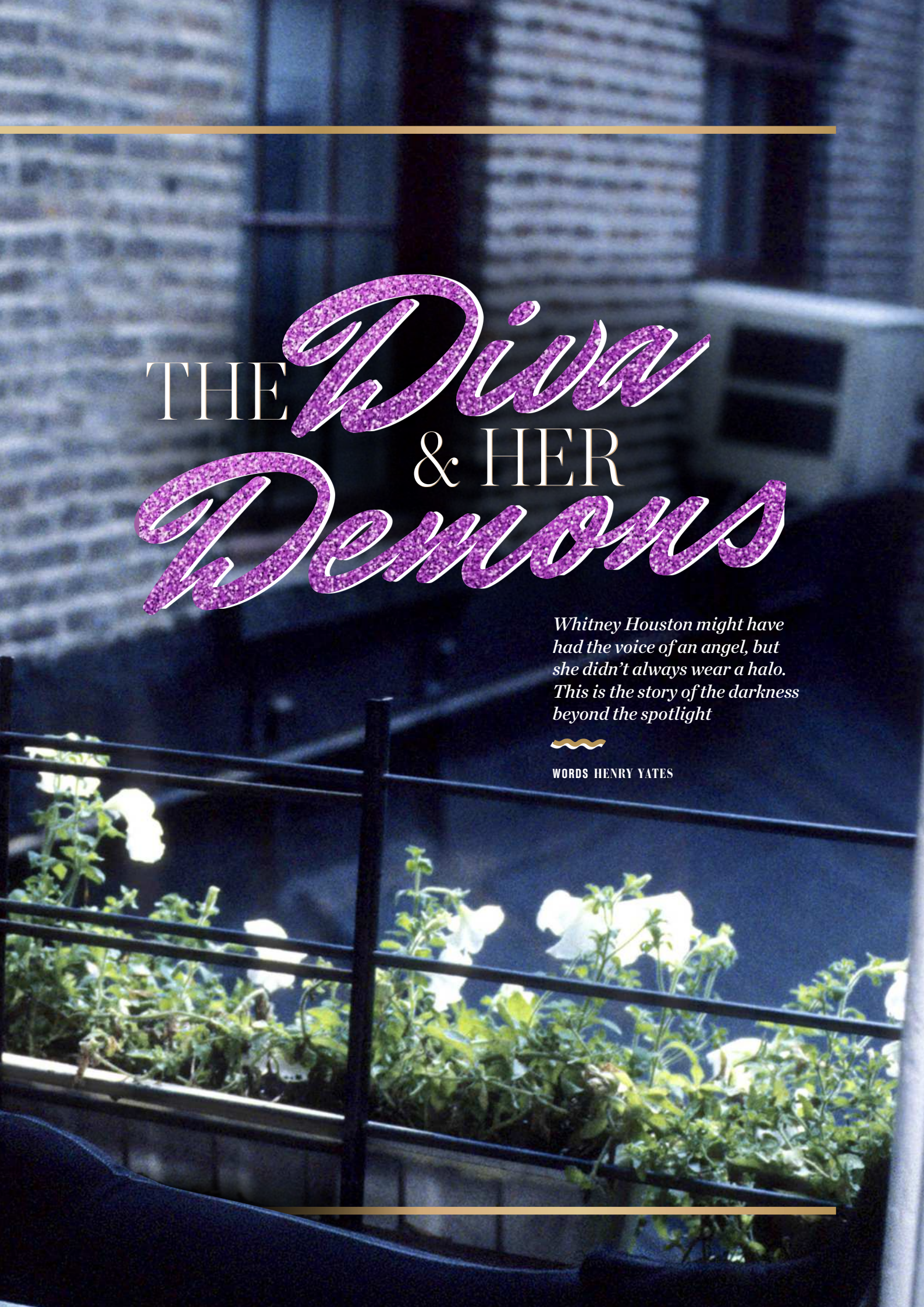
Images Getty Images

CHAPTER 5

Image Getty Images

THE DIVA & HER DEMONS

Image Getty Images



THE Diva & HER Demons

Whitney Houston might have had the voice of an angel, but she didn't always wear a halo. This is the story of the darkness beyond the spotlight

WORDS HENRY YATES

There is no way to predict how an individual will react to white-hot global fame. Back in 1983, when he first witnessed the miracle of Whitney Houston in the sweatbox clubs of downtown Manhattan, Arista Records president Clive Davis identified a singer born for the spotlight. "She came out to sing in her mother's act at a club called Sweetwaters," he told ABC. "To hear this young girl breathe such fire into the song, it sent the proverbial tingles up my spine."

If all she had to do was sing, Whitney might have survived her reign as the biggest pop star on the planet. But having the talent for major-league showbusiness is one thing, having the temperament for its trappings is quite another. When reflecting on the star's chaotic decades as public property, it becomes painfully clear that the gravity-defying vocals Whitney trilled and purred into the microphone were the easy part.

What Davis could not have foreseen that fateful night was the circus soon to engulf the young singer, the cocktail of poisons that fame would drip into her personal life and how Whitney's blank-cheque existence – with its lack of limits, checks and balances – would ignite and enable her darkest instincts. "I've learnt that problems don't change," the star once reflected. "No matter if you got millions, billions or zillions, you still got problems."

Right out of the blocks, stardom cost Whitney one of the healthiest, most positive relationships of her life. Back in the summer of 1980 – aged just 16 – she had met teenage All-State basketball star Robyn

TOP *Whitney with best friend Robyn Crawford.*

ABOVE *From left to right: Michael Houston, Robyn Crawford, Whitney, Gary Houston, and family friend Ellen White ('Aunt Bae').*

RIGHT *Despite engagement rumours, Eddie Murphy has stated that he and Whitney were ever only friends.*

Whitney's blank-cheque existence would ignite and enable her darkest instincts

Crawford while working at a community centre, and felt an immediate spark. "I didn't like to fight," the singer told interviewer Lynn Norment in 1991. "I was not outspoken or really outgoing. Robyn was. The other girls always wanted to whip me for no reason. So once Robyn became my big sister, all that ended."

The exact nature of the pair's early relationship has been debated – and fiercely shushed by some, including Whitney herself – but in her 2019 memoir, *A Song for You: A Life with Whitney Houston*, Crawford makes a credible case that the two young women became lovers. "We never talked labels, like lesbian and gay," she writes. "We just lived our lives, and I hoped it could go on that way forever."

While Crawford would remain perhaps the truest friend of Whitney's life, their alleged love affair soon jarred with the singer's rocketing career. In an era when pop princesses had to be not only traditionally attractive but visibly straight, the church-raised Whitney – according to an excerpt from *A Song for You* – presented Crawford with a Bible and told her their relationship had to end. "She said we shouldn't be physical anymore, because it would make our journey even more difficult," wrote Crawford. "She said if people find out about us, they would use this against us, and back in the '80s that's how it felt."

Instead, Whitney hired Crawford as her executive assistant and the pair shared an apartment in

Images Getty Images, Alamy

LEFT *After they met at the Soul Train Music Awards in 1989, Whitney started dating R&B star Bobby Brown.*

ABOVE *Houston and Brown on their wedding day, alongside some of their groomsmen and bridesmaids.*

OPPOSITE *Whitney later admitted that she felt Bobby became jealous of her success following* The Bodyguard.

Woodbridge, New Jersey, where they kept cats and made big plans. Some of her duties were practical – nobody else could iron the star's clothes just right, she told *The Guardian* – but Crawford was also the closest thing Whitney had to a confidant, swallowing her pain to counsel the star when she began dating men who occupied her A-list orbit, like Jermaine Jackson and Eddie Murphy. "It didn't feel like she was cheating on me," she says of those mid-'80s couplings. "It felt more like she was leaving me out."

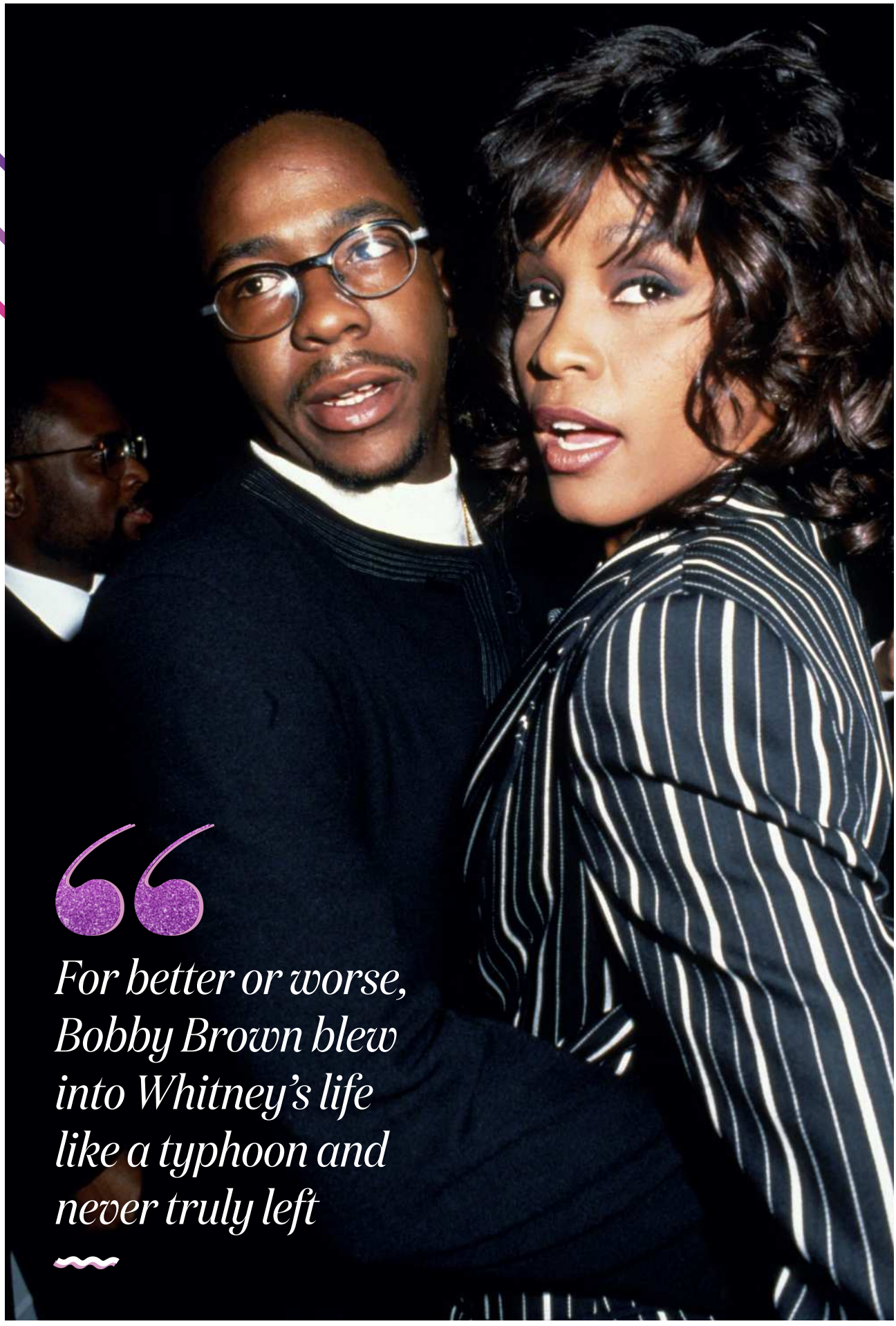
With Whitney's career on a level pegging to Murphy's profile in the wake of 1984's *Beverly Hills Cop*, the hook-up was prime meat for a then-unregulated tabloid press. At their most generous, the media splashes would be as frothy and excitable as a teen pyjama party, cooing over the 5.5-carat diamond ring that Murphy reportedly put on the star's finger at her 26th birthday party.

More often, the coverage was mean-spirited, with headlines that questioned Whitney's sexuality or claimed the men in her life were a front for her relationship with Crawford. "Picture this," the singer told *Ebony* magazine. "You wake up every day with a magnifying glass over you. Like my friend Michael Jackson says, 'You want our blood but you don't want our pain'."

While a run of celebrity boyfriends came and went, for better or worse, one lover blew into Whitney's life like a typhoon at the 1989 Soul Train Music Awards and never truly left. "That is going to be my husband," Whitney is reported to have said as she caught sight of Bobby Brown.

Born in 1969 and raised among the gunshots of the Boston ghetto, the singer had made his first moves as resident 'bad boy' of R&B group New Edition and was already noted as a pioneer of the new jack swing scene. But whatever his musical accomplishments, then or now, Brown's reputation is surely cemented as the fellow hedonist who accompanied Whitney on her road into hell.

True to her word, Houston and Brown were married in July 1992 in a star-studded ceremony at Whitney's New Jersey estate. Even an 11th-hour plea from Murphy couldn't change her mind (Crawford claims the actor phoned with the warning: "Don't marry Bobby, he's no good"), much less the concerns of her family. "John, Whitney's father, told me how upset he was that she was marrying Bobby," Arista A&R Gerry Griffith told *Vanity Fair*. "Most people were. We knew Bobby and the type of guy he was – a street guy. But Whitney was smart enough to handle somebody like Bobby."



For better or worse, Bobby Brown blew into Whitney's life like a typhoon and never truly left

Images Getty Images, Alamy

In March 1993, daughter Bobbi Kristina arrived and overnight a new tenderness seemed to bloom in Whitney

By the star's own account, the media narrative that portrayed Whitney as the fallen angel and Brown as the malignant parasite was off the mark. "Bobby and I basically come from the same place," she told *Rolling Stone* in 1993. "You see somebody, and you deal with their image. It's part of them, it's not the whole picture. I am not always in a sequinned gown. I am nobody's angel. I can get down and dirty. I can get raunchy."

Houston and Brown moved at lightning pace through the milestones of a traditional relationship. In March 1993, daughter Bobbi Kristina arrived and overnight a new tenderness seemed to bloom in Whitney. "I've never found anything more fulfilling than being a mother," she said. "I never thought I could love as much as I love her. She teaches me about love everyday."

Behind the scenes, though, this was no blissful family unit. Whitney would reflect that her relationship with Brown nosedived after she unintentionally put him in her shadow with 1992's smash-hit movie *The Bodyguard* and its 45-million-selling soundtrack ("Something happens to a man when a woman has that much fame"). Even before this, according to Crawford's 2019 interview with *The Guardian*, the fights had begun on the couple's honeymoon, the singer returning with a three-inch gash on one cheek caused by a flying wine glass. "A lot of the physical stuff that Bobby did was when I wasn't there," she said. "But you never knew when he would misbehave."

In those early days, Whitney put up a spirited defence of her husband. "Contrary to the belief, I do the hitting, he doesn't," the singer told *Redbook* magazine in a 1999 interview. "He has never put his hands on me. He wasn't raised that way. He is not a woman-beater and I wish they would stop saying that about him."

As to reports that Brown was a serial cheat, Houston shot them down in the same interview. "Bobby is a party guy. He likes to go out and he likes to hang with his friends. He likes to dance with different people. When people saw him without me doing that, they figured, 'Oh, he's out cheating'. Now, I'm a smart girl, okay? I follow up. I have checked my husband out and he was nothing like they say he was – nothing."

By the turn of the millennium, it was Whitney herself who seemed like the wayward partner. Journalists and photographers found themselves

TOP *A pregnant Whitney poses while on holiday. Her daughter Bobbi Kristina was born on 4 March 1993.*

LEFT *Whitney with Bobbi Kristina in archive footage from the 2018 documentary,* Whitney.

waiting hours for the star to show up, only to meet a distant, chaotic and incoherent shadow of pop's poster girl. "She was acting really strange," said Jane Pratt, editor-in-chief of *Jane* magazine, of one notorious encounter. "She was singing to herself. Then she would pretend to play the piano, like an air piano. Her eyes were heavy-lidded..."

As a live performer, too, Whitney was becoming unpredictable. On 1999's My Love Is Your Love Tour, some concerts were cancelled minutes before showtime. When the star sang the hits, they were in a noticeably lower key to support her fraying voice. "Where was Whitney?" demanded *The New York Post* after the singer's scheduled performance of 'Over the Rainbow' at the 2000 Oscars was nixed. "Houston's voice was shaky," wrote entertainment journalist Steve Pond of aborted rehearsals with Burt Bacharach. "She seemed distracted and jittery and her attitude was casual."

As for Brown – whose rap sheet previously ranged from crashing Houston's Porsche to beating up a guest at Walt Disney World – his antics had now taken on a darker tone, according to the memoir of Whitney's mother. "Somebody had spray-painted

TOP *The Houston-Brown family on stage in July 1999.*

ABOVE *In a 1993 interview with Barbara Walters (pictured), Whitney revealed that she had suffered a miscarriage while making* The Bodyguard.

Images Getty Images, Alamy

OPPOSITE *At a celebration show in honour of Michael Jackson in 2001, Whitney's skeletal appearance shocked viewers.*

the walls and door with big glaring eyes and strange faces," she wrote of the couple's home. "Evil eyes, staring out like a threat. In another room, there was a big framed photo of Whitney – but someone had cut her head out. It was beyond disturbing, seeing my daughter's face cut out like that."

By now, the violence in Brown and Houston's relationship was in the public domain. In 2003, police were called to the couple's Georgia home to find the singer with a burst lip and bruised cheek. "Upon arrival, officers spoke with Ms Houston," read the police report, "who said Brown confronted her and stated he was going to 'beat her ass'. Shortly thereafter, Mr Brown struck her with an open right hand, according to Ms Houston's statement."

When Brown turned himself in and was duly charged with battery, many predicted the year's highest-profile showbiz divorce. But even then,

> *Whitney would admit to Oprah Winfrey that narcotics had been in the picture since the '90s*

their twisted fairytale romance continued, with the couple leaving the court hearing in an embrace, singing to an old Aretha Franklin song. "We're still together," Whitney told bemused reporters.

As Whitney would admit to Oprah Winfrey in a now legendary 2009 interview, narcotics had been in the picture since the '90s, when the couple's semi-nocturnal existence saw them festering at home in pyjamas, watching TV round the clock and smoking joints laced with cocaine. Now, having narrowly dodged arrest for marijuana possession

Kin tells mag: Whitney's a half-toothless addict

HOUSTON, YOU GOT A PROBLEM ... CRACK!

BY MICHELLE CARUSO
DAILY NEWS WEST COAST BUREAU CHIEF

LOS ANGELES — Songbird Whitney Houston has become a half-toothless crack addict who hangs out in dangerous drug dens and sees "demons" in fits of dope-induced paranoia, a new report claims.

The sister-in-law of the multi-Grammy winner made the allegations as she spilled her own drug secrets to The National Enquirer in an exclusive report in its April 10 issue.

"The truth needs to come out. She won't stay off the drugs. It's every single day. It's so ugly. Everyone is so scared she is going to OD," Tina Brown, 42, told the tabloid.

Brown, the sister of Houston's bad-boy husband R&B singer Bobby Brown, admits she "did crack with Whitney" on many occasions, but the tattler says she went straight last Aug. 24.

Tina Brown says she ratted on her ex-"drug buddy" in hopes of forcing Houston, 42, to face the music and get help. "Maybe this will save her life," she said.

Lurid photos supplied by Brown, and reportedly taken in January at Houston's Georgia home, show a filthy bathroom littered with drug paraphernalia, including powder-coated spoons, garbage and debris.

The Enquirer story says Houston was regularly using drugs in early and mid-2004. "Being Bobby Brown," the Brown network reality TV series she starred in with her husband, was reportedly filmed between January 2004 and June 2004.

The once-gorgeous, velvet-voiced crooner who wooed Kevin Costner in "The Bodyguard" now "spends her days locked in her bedroom amid piles of garbage, smoking crack, using sex toys to satisfy herself and ignoring personal hygiene," the tabloid says.

Nancy Seltzer, a spokeswoman for Houston, said she has not seen the story and could not comment on it.

The story also claims that:

■ Whitney hallucinates and sees "demons" when she's high. She bites and beats herself black-and-blue but blames the "Devil" for the injuries. "The Devil he hitting me," Whitney reportedly told Brown.

■ When Whitney's mom, Cissy, forced her to attend rehab sessions in March 2004, Tina Brown says, Whitney smoked crack on the way to the meetings and dodged the urine drug tests saying: "I'm not giving you no pee today. I don't have none right now."

■ Whitney allegedly loses her $6,000 set of false teeth when she's high and once appeared toothless, scaring the kids at her niece's school.

■ Whitney smokes as much as an "eighth" (3.8 of an ounce) of crack at a time, mixing it with marijuana encased in a cigar wrapper, according to Tina Brown.

■ In 2004, a drug dealer called Bobby Brown and ordered him to remove the paranoid and out-of-control Whitney from his crack house. "Come get your wife. I'm sick of this b—," the dealer reportedly complained.

R&B diva Whitney Houston looked glamorous during taping of a BET special last Oct. 26 but an upcoming National Enquirer issue (inset) claims the singer is addicted to crack.

Enquirer
WHITNEY'S DRUG DEN!
PLUS
I DID CRACK WITH WHITNEY

TOP *Archive footage used in* Whitney: Can I Be Me? *showed the often sad reality of the singer's life behind the scenes.*

ABOVE *Whitney's drug problems intensified in the Noughties.*

BELOW *A promotional photo for the reality series* Being Bobby Brown. *In Whitney's obituary,* The Guardian *reflected that in the show, she lost "the last remnants of her dignity".*

Images Getty Images, Alamy

at a Hawaii airport in January 2000, Brown and Houston's drug intake became a new fascination for the tabloids.

In September 2001, Whitney appeared at a 30th anniversary TV special for Michael Jackson looking strikingly gaunt. While her publicist offered an explanation ("Whitney has been under stress due to family matters and when she is under stress she doesn't eat"), the star's hairdresser, Ellin LaVar, spoke frankly in an interview with *Vanity Fair*: "I went into the bathroom with her that night and I said, 'Look at you! You keep this up and you are going to die'. I didn't know what 'this' was, but she cried and said, 'I know.' That same night a stylist said, 'Whitney, you look fabulous'. I said, 'Why did you say that? Whitney doesn't look good!'"

In her infamous 2002 interview with Diane Sawyer, Whitney denied whispers of harder substances. "First of all, let's get one thing straight. Crack is cheap. I make too much money to ever smoke crack. Let's get that straight. Okay? We don't do crack. We don't do that. Crack is wack." However, in the same interview, Whitney admitted to abusing alcohol, cannabis, cocaine and prescription pills. "The biggest devil is me," she conceded. "I'm either my best friend or my worst enemy. And that's how I have to deal with it."

Nobody could question that sentiment after watching *Being Bobby Brown*. Aired on Bravo from June 2005, this fly-on-the-wall reality TV show laid the couple's lifestyle excruciatingly bare. Brown

> *In 2009, she scored her first US chart-topping album since* The Bodyguard *with* I Look to You

was criticised as a delusional, oversexed braggart ("Jack be nimble, Jack be quick," he tells his wife in one cringe-inducing scene. "Bring that ass in quick, I'm gonna show you what I do with it"). But it's Whitney – dead-eyed, wild-haired and plainly lost – whose presence aches.

"*Being Bobby Brown* is undoubtedly the most disgusting and execrable series ever to ooze its way onto television," wrote *The Hollywood Reporter*. "It is the lionising of a lowlife. Not only does it reveal Brown to be even more vulgar than the tabloids suggest, but it manages at the same time to rob Houston of any last shreds of dignity."

ABOVE *When Brown appeared in court in 2002 for drug and traffic offences, Houston continued to support him.*

RIGHT *Whitney's 2002 interview with Diane Sawyer became infamous for her "crack is wack" remarks.*

TOP *Cissy Houston staged several interventions for her daughter to try and help get Whitney into rehab for her drug addiction.*

ABOVE *In the late Noughties, Whitney rallied with her successful comeback album,* I Look to You.

The sanest voice in Whitney's ear – Robyn Crawford – had left the star's retinue in the early millennium, having been increasingly kept at arm's length from her old friend, and maddened by too many failed attempts to quell her habits. Now, the same year that *Being Bobby Brown* went out, Whitney's mother staged an intervention. "I see the love and the passion that my mother had for me," Whitney reflected in the Oprah interview. "She walks in with these sheriffs and she says 'I have a court injunction here. Either you do it my way or we're just not going to do this at all. We're going to go on TV and you're going to retire and say you're going to give this up. Because this is not worth it'."

Perhaps the humiliation of *Being Bobby Brown* was the final straw, too, for the Houston/Brown marriage: they separated soon after, divorcing in 2007. Even then, Whitney would tell Oprah of their unbreakable bond and shared responsibility. "He was my drug. I didn't do anything without him. I wasn't getting high by myself. It was me and him together, and we were partners, and that's what my high was – him. He and I being together, and whatever we did, we did it together."

For just a heartbeat, it seemed Brown's exit would nudge the singer back into calmer waters. In 2009, she scored her first US chart-topping album since *The Bodyguard* with *I Look to You*, while declaring herself drug-free in the aforementioned Winfrey interview. At that November's American Music Awards, she wowed the crowds with a restorative performance of the Diane Warren-penned 'I Didn't Know My Own Strength', its redemptive lyrics seemingly tying a bow on her low years.

But in an established pattern of rebirth and collapse, the Nothing But Love Tour would not be the triumphant comeback Whitney had hoped for. Reviews were mixed at best and brutal at worst, with reports of some disappointed Australian fans walking out. "There are slivers of the super-talented young Whitney..." noted *The Independent*'s review of a Dublin show, "but they arrive so infrequently it hardly matters." A particularly ruthless review in Denmark's *Berlingske Tidende* newspaper stated, "She looked and sounded like a person who doesn't have many years left to live."

The soundbite was callous but prophetic. The singer returned to rehab in May 2011, and from there began the crawl towards Suite 434 at the Beverly Hilton hotel and the death that managed to be both shocking and inevitable. Whitney Houston was the most natural singer of her generation – but it was hard to imagine someone less suited to stardom. "Success doesn't change you," she noted sadly in one video interview. "But fame does..." W

Images Getty Images

Image Getty Images

WHITNEY & BOBBY

Ever since they met at the 1989 Soul Train Music Awards, the press were fascinated by the 'opposites attract' relationship between America's pop princess and R&B bad boy Bobby Brown. This photo was released to celebrate their engagement after Brown proposed in September 1991. They married the following July in a lavish ceremony with 800 guests.

CHAPTER 6

Image Getty Images

6
LOST
SOUL

LOST Soul

The music stopped with Whitney Houston's shocking death in 2012. This is the story of the troubled star's final days and farewell

WORDS **HENRY YATES**

TOP *Whitney had been staying at the Beverly Hilton ahead of Clive Davis' annual pre-Grammy party, which she was due to attend on 11 February 2012.*

ABOVE *Her final performance was at the Kelly Price & Friends Unplugged event on 9 February 2012.*

It was February 2012, and showbusiness as usual at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Los Angeles. A gleaming trickle of limousines purred through the gates of the whitewashed edifice opened in 1955 by Conrad Hilton. A squad of bellboys scurried with the luggage of celebrity guests, their hands out for $50 tips. In the opulent International Ballroom, a team of waiters flapped crisp white linen tablecloths and shined silver for the pre-Grammy Awards party that music mogul Clive Davis had thrown there every year since the late-'70s.

At a glance, then, the Beverly Hilton seemed every inch a utopian kingdom of unimaginable luxury: a cosseted bubble that death and tragedy could not puncture, populated by the beautiful people on whom life had showered its greatest blessings. Indeed, it was within these walls that a young Whitney Houston had enjoyed the most exciting days of her fledgling career, presented by Davis to the industry and showcasing that once-in-a-generation voice on the ballroom stage. How times had changed. Nobody knew it yet, but in Suite 434, the clock was running down on the 48-year-old singer's life.

Her death might have played out behind closed doors, but Whitney's final days can be pieced together from the testimony of those who observed them. *The LA Times* would report on her aura of chaos when dropping by to advise the R&B duo Brandy and Monica on their headline set at Davis' upcoming event.

"Houston appeared dishevelled in mismatched clothes," wrote the paper. "The visibly bloated singer displayed erratic behaviour throughout the

Images Getty Images

afternoon – flailing her hands frenetically as she spoke to Brandy and Monica, skipping around the ballroom in a child-like fashion and wandering aimlessly about the lobby. She smelled of alcohol and cigarettes."

It's a portrait offset by Whitney's long-standing musical director Rickey Minor, who told *The New York Post* of an encounter that suggested the singer was clawing back from the brink: "She pops into rehearsal and we hadn't even started, and it's 10.30 in the morning," recalled Minor. "Like, she doesn't get up til the crack of three, y'know? She's not a morning person. She loves her sleep and she's a night owl, so I never get to see her at 10.30. And she was kind of wet, like, dripping. And I said, 'Where are you coming from?' She says, 'I've been swimming. I'm getting my lungs back. I'm getting back in shape'."

It seems Whitney's taste for the small hours won out. Late on 9 February, she sang onstage for the final time at the Tru nightclub, performing 'Jesus Loves Me' at an event thrown for Grammy nominee Kelly Price. *The Hollywood Reporter* would tell of a clash with *X Factor* finalist Stacy Francis – "Whitney just got belligerent," a witness told the outlet – while MSNBC criticised her "raspy" vocals and paparazzi outside the club snapped the star looking rumpled and heavy-lidded. But in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Price denied reports of another Whitney trainwreck. "There was no craziness going on, absolutely none of it," she told the magazine. "It was great, she had a good time, she was happy and that was all night long."

> *It was a small, sad, lonely end for a singer whose lifeforce had blazed off the screen*

The day of Whitney's death – 11 February – began with the mundane machinations familiar to any major star ensconced in a luxury hotel. At some point that morning, Whitney spoke on the phone to her cousin, soul legend Dionne Warwick, to establish that both women would be seated together at Davis' party that evening. "She said, 'You're here, aren't you? You're coming to the party, aren't you?'" Warwick told *Good Morning America*. "I said, 'Yeah, I'm going to be there', and she said, 'Thank you, I want you to be here. You've got to be here for me.'"

ABOVE *Clive Davis' gala controversially went ahead as an impromptu tribute to Whitney, just hours after her death.*

LEFT *Alicia Keys paid homage to Whitney during her performance at the pre-Grammy party.*

Whitney was clearly fragile, but in the same interview, Warwick stressed that the younger singer still seemed to envisage a future. "She was so up and ready and happy. She had everything in the world to live for. She had a new film [*Sparkle*] that was an absolute dream to make and do. She was getting ready to go back into the studio to record, getting her vocals together."

That afternoon, shortly after 3pm, Whitney's phone rang again and she had a conversation with her mother. But less than an hour later came the door knock, the desperate forced entry to 434 and a bodyguard's shattering discovery of the singer lying unresponsive in the bathtub. The 20-minute CPR efforts of paramedics proved fruitless, and the singer was pronounced dead at 3.55pm. The coroner's report later concluded Whitney had drowned face-down in 12 inches of "extremely hot water", compounded by the "effects of atherosclerotic heart disease and cocaine use".

Speaking to CNN, addiction medicine expert Dr Drew Pinsky theorised that Whitney's sudden withdrawal from prescription sedatives, combined with cocaine, might have been the fatal cocktail. "To me, a sudden drop off in the Xanax level, a drop off in your alcohol consumption, add cocaine, that's a recipe for a seizure," said Pinsky.

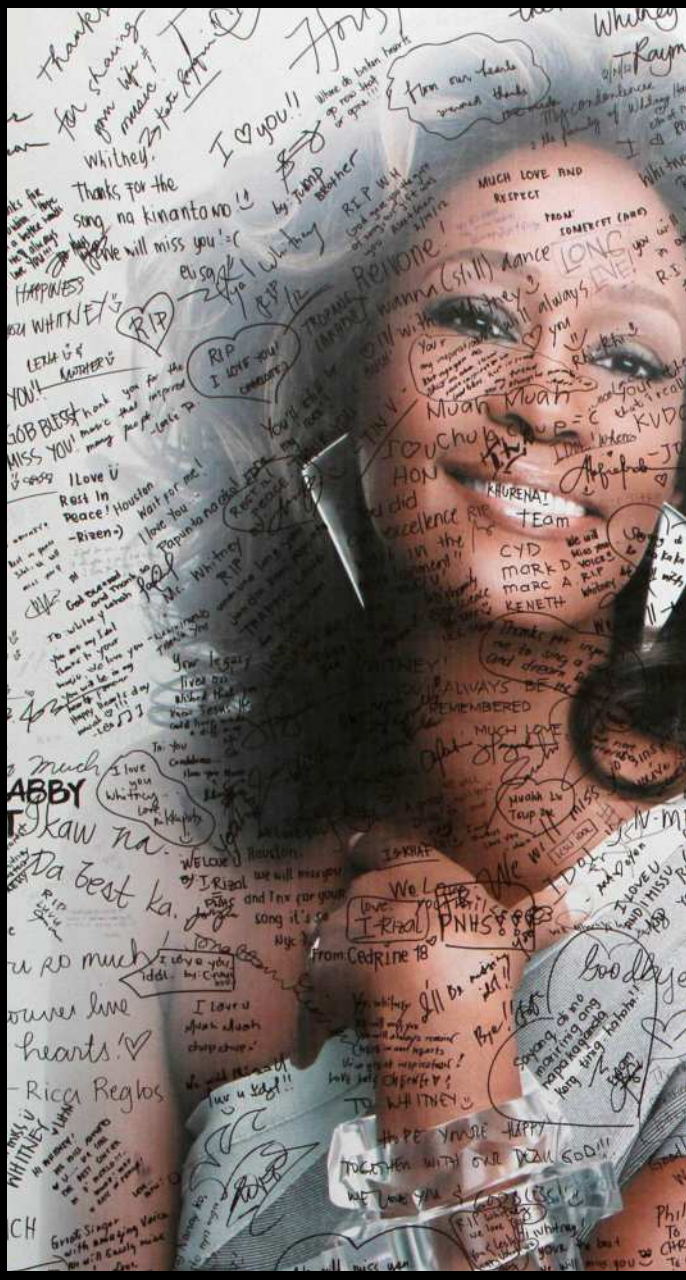
BELOW *Whitney's mother Cissy performing at a tribute to her daughter at the BET Awards, July 2012.*

Images Getty Images, Alamy

TOP *The official coroner's report found that Whitney's death was accidental, caused by "drowning and effects of atherosclerotic heart disease and cocaine use".*

MIDDLE *When the news of her death broke, Whitney's fans gathered for street memorials.*

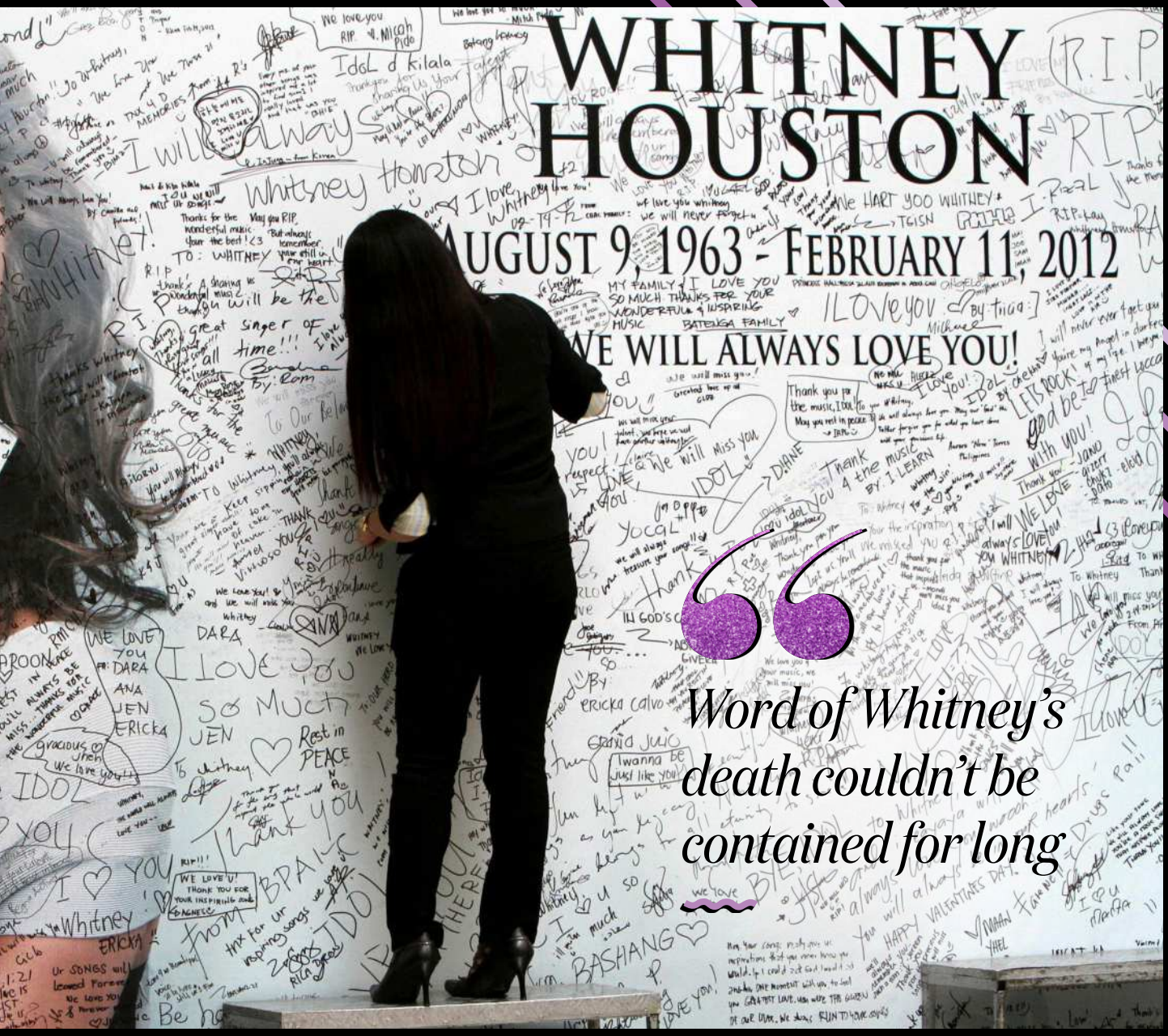
ABOVE *The Apollo Theater in Harlem – where Whitney filmed the video for 1986's 'Greatest Love of All' – pays tribute to the singer.*



"Somebody who's now upside down in a bathtub could easily seize and drown."

It was a small, sad, lonely end for a singer whose lifeforce in prime-era music videos like 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' had blazed off the screen. Perhaps the darkest of consolations was that Whitney would never know the future fate of her daughter, Bobbi Kristina Brown, who would perish in horribly similar circumstances, pulled lifeless from the tub of her Georgia home in 2015.

Word of Whitney's death couldn't be contained for long. As the world struggled to process the black news, and the first floral tributes festooned the sidewalks outside the Beverly Hilton, the events that followed within the hotel were either a well-meant celebration of a young woman taken



Word of Whitney's death couldn't be contained for long

too soon, or showbiz at its most ghoulish and tone-deaf, depending on who you asked.

Before Whitney's body had even been removed from the hotel by authorities, the pre-Grammys gala was in full swing in the ballroom below, with a plainly devastated Davis adapting the event into a tribute to his most famous protégé. "By now, you have all learned of the unspeakably tragic news of our beloved Whitney's passing," he said in an opening speech. "I don't have to mask my emotion in front of a room full of so many dear friends. I am personally devastated by the loss of someone who has meant so much to me for so many years. Whitney was so full of life. She was so looking forward to tonight even though she wasn't scheduled to perform."

BELOW *Whitney's death shocked fans all over the world. Fans in Manila, the Philippines, write messages on a tribute wall.*

Davis continued: "Whitney was a beautiful person and a talent beyond compare. She graced this stage with her regal presence and gave so many memorable performances here over the years. Simply put, Whitney would have wanted the music to go on, and her family asked that we carry on."

Blinking back tears, most of the concert's billed stars honoured their bookings, with Tony Bennett saluting "the greatest singer I've ever heard in my life" and Alicia Keys asking attendees to "sing Whitney into heaven" with a rendition of 'No One'. But not everyone in showbiz was convinced. Funk legend Chaka Khan would tell

Images Getty Images, Alamy

LEFT *A funeral service was held at Whitney's childhood church, the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, on 18 February 2012.*

ABOVE *Whitney was buried next to her father at Fairview Cemetery in Westfield, New Jersey. In August 2015, Bobbi Kristina was also buried beside her.*

Piers Morgan of the "complete insanity" of going ahead with the gala, while Sharon Osbourne was scathing in an interview with *The Talk*. "It was disgraceful that the party went on. I don't want to be in a hotel room when there's someone you admire who's tragically lost their life four floors up. I'm not interested in being in that environment and I think when you grieve someone, you do it privately, you do it with people who understand you. I thought it was so wrong."

If the glitz of the Beverly Hilton send-off left a bad taste in some mouths, then as a singer who had found her voice in the church, it was entirely fitting that Whitney's last goodbye was marked by a more dignified funeral at the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey, on 18 February.

Even then, the departure of pop's greatest talent could be no ordinary service, with legends including Warwick, Keys, Stevie Wonder, CeCe Winans, Kim Burrell and an as-yet-untainted R Kelly all performing in Whitney's honour, before the singer's burial in Fairview Cemetery next to her father.

There would be one last spark of controversy from Bobby Brown, who debated with church officials before approaching Whitney's coffin, laying a hand upon it and leaving the venue in tears (all before the service had even begun). "We were seated by security then subsequently asked to move on three separate occasions," justified the singer in a statement. "I fail to understand why security treated my family this way and continued to ask us and no one else to move. Security then prevented me from attempting to see my daughter, Bobbi Kristina. In light of the events, I gave a kiss to the casket of my ex-wife and departed, as I refused to create a scene."

> *The dominant mood of the day was a heartfelt outpouring from those whose lives Whitney had touched*

With the divisive Brown gone, the dominant mood of the day was a heartfelt outpouring from those whose lives Whitney had touched. In his eulogy, Davis would speak of the singer's wide-eyed plans for new music in the days before her death ("Clive, I'm gonna be ready by August...").

But perhaps most poignant of all were the parting words of Whitney's *Bodyguard* co-star Kevin Costner. "There's a lady in heaven who is making God himself wonder how he created something so perfect," the actor told the congregation. "We should suspend our sorrow, perhaps our anger, just long enough to remember the sweet miracle of Whitney..."

OPPOSITE *Tragically, Whitney's daughter Bobbi Kristina passed away in 2015 at the age of 22. She was found unconscious in a bathtub, and later died after being in a coma for six months.*

Images Getty Images

You wait for a voice like that for a lifetime. You wait for a face like that, a smile like that, a presence like that, for a lifetime. When one person embodies it all, it takes your breath away

CLIVE DAVIS SPEAKING AT HOUSTON'S FUNERAL IN FEBRUARY 2012

Image Getty Images

CHAPTER 7

Image Getty Images

7

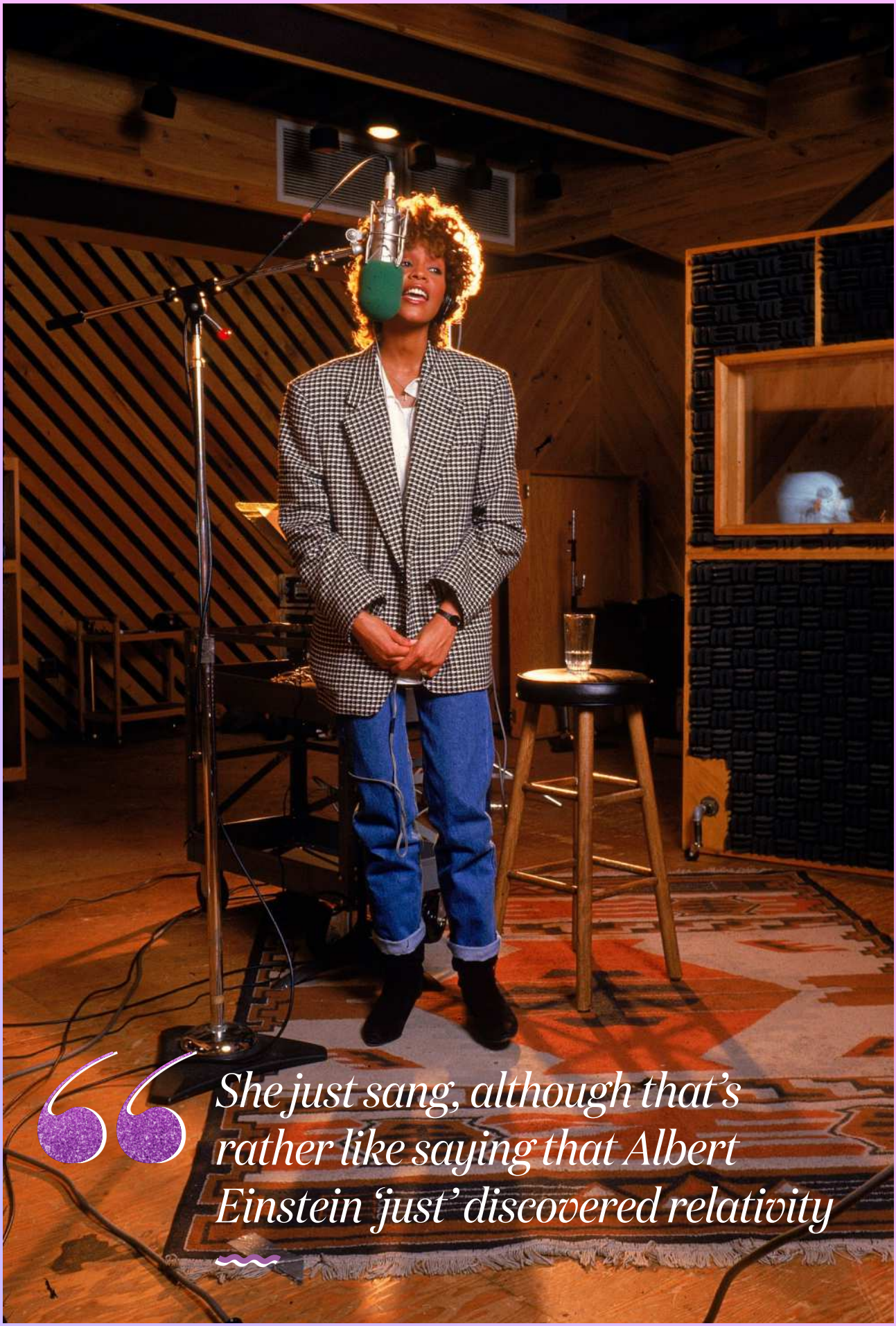
WHITNEY'S LEGACY

Whitney's LEGACY

Whitney may no longer be with us – but we'll always have her songs, her artistry, and her example

WORDS DAVE SMITH

Image Alamy



She just sang, although that's rather like saying that Albert Einstein 'just' discovered relativity

If someone asked you how Whitney Houston influenced the world of popular music, and specifically the field of vocals, it would be all too easy to point at a whole host of reality TV contestants – some commercially successful, others less so – who belt out loud, dramatic, endlessly wavery performances, emoting intensely as they do so. We won't name any names here, but we think you know the kind of singer we're referring to.

OPPOSITE *Few singers can hold a candle to Whitney's voice, with her sheer power, soul and technical prowess.*

TOP *The enduring popularity of* The Bodyguard *and its soundtrack led to a successful stage musical adaptation.*

ABOVE *Madame Tussauds unveiled four waxworks of the late Whitney in February 2013, depicting some of the most iconic moments of her career.*

However, this would be a bit unfair. Very few of these *American Idol* and *X Factor*-spawned singers understand, let alone possess, the talents that Whitney had as a singer. She could, and did, execute vocal acrobatics when she chose to do so, but anyone who has taken the time to listen through her deeper album tracks knows that she was also a master of moderation. Many of her vocal performances are sung 'straight', or without melisma, as the BBC pointed out in a 2012 article where they asked a panel of experts what it was that made Whitney's vocals so special.

"She's like a cook who never overused her spice. She was always very delicate about what she would use," said Carrie Grant, a vocal coach on *Fame Academy* who regularly saw contestants attempting to emulate that up-and-down singing style. "She never oversang, and people, therefore, were touched and moved by the emotion and the story of that song. She's the singer that would give you goosebumps." A professional opera singer called Sarah-Jane Dale added, "You can't do it without proper breath control, and that's the one thing that Whitney Houston had bags of. Let's face it, singers like that do not come along every week."

The article also pointed out that Whitney's vocals were sung, like those of all highly trained singers, from her diaphragm rather than her throat, and that she understood how to select the right vocal sounds for long, extended notes – for example, it's easier to sing the word 'she' or 'you' for many unbroken seconds than it is to sing 'round' or 'light'.

In other words, Whitney was a vocal master, with world-class training and performance skills, and it's simply not possible for an amateur to approach her level of virtuosity. Those singers who have understood Whitney's art and used her as a role model are all highly skilled technicians: Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Beyoncé, Kelly Clarkson and Jennifer Hudson, definitely – and arguably Adele, Lady Gaga, Leona Lewis and Jessie J too.

In any case, what most people fail to appreciate was that Whitney was far more than a vocal stylist. She's rightly acknowledged as a cultural force, like anyone of her commercial stature, but the added nuance is that she progressed the popularity of African-American music and films more than most of us appreciate. As *The New York Times* put it, "Houston was a major catalyst for a movement

Images Getty Images

TOP *Even after three decades,* The Bodyguard Original Soundtrack Album *remains the best-selling soundtrack and the best-selling album by a female artist, with an estimated 45 million copies sold.*

ABOVE *The success of 1995's* Waiting to Exhale *helped pave the way for more Black female leads on screen.*

within Black music that recognised the continuity of soul, pop, jazz and gospel vocal traditions."

Not only does this mean that Whitney performed a compelling combination of soul, R&B and dance music, she also sold millions of albums while doing so. The environment in which she did this was often unfriendly to these genres, especially on her way up in the Eighties. As *Time* magazine explained it, "This chanteuse had to fight for airplay with hard rockers. The young lady had to stand uncowed in the locker room of macho rock. The soul strutter had to seduce a music audience that anointed few Black artists with superstardom... She was a phenomenon waiting to happen, a canny tapping of the listener's yen for a return to the musical middle."

In her advancement of Black music, Whitney is often compared to Michael Jackson, whose period of greatest commercial success – say 1982 to '95 – came a few years before her peak profile of around 1985 to '99. Like Whitney, the late MJ brought white audiences around to music of Black origin, although he did what Whitney did not, which was to appeal particularly to rock fans, as indeed Prince did around the same time.

Unlike those two performers, however, Whitney was never a spectacular dancer, she didn't use rock musicians on her albums, and she didn't resort to sexual or otherwise controversial content in her songs. She just sang, although that's rather like saying that Albert Einstein 'just' discovered relativity. As the *The Independent* put it, "Jackson was a hugely talented icon, certainly, but he will be as well remembered (probably more so) for his presentational skills, his dazzling dance moves, as for his musical innovations. Whitney, on the other hand, just sang, and the ripples from her voice continue to dominate the pop landscape."

Whitney's role as a progressor of African-American culture has been debated endlessly over the years. Expert opinions on the subject include one from *The New York Times*, which accurately pointed to her church background as a persuasive element of her style. She "revitalised the tradition of strong, gospel-oriented pop-soul singing," she was "R&B's great moderniser" and she "slowly but surely reconcil[ed] the ambition and praise of the church with the movements and needs of the body and the glow of the mainstream,", said the *NYT*.

The newspaper also made the perceptive point that Whitney was less prolific than the other two musicians we mentioned, and generally chose a sound that was less heavy on production gimmickry, focusing instead on a simpler, more traditional approach. It was always her voice that sold the songs, not their arrangements, mix or

instrumentation, and the majority of her success rested on four albums, one of them a movie soundtrack. That's a perfect definition of quality over quantity.

Let's also not forget that Whitney was one of the few Black women in mainstream cinema in the early to mid Nineties. Men of colour were frequently seen in the biggest movies of the era, from Will Smith and Denzel Washington to Samuel L Jackson, Laurence Fishburne and Wesley Snipes, but representation was far lower among women. "There's Halle Berry, but after her you're really starting to reach: for women, we still got a long way to go to get to the big money," commented Ice-T, himself a musician turned actor.

Whitney took significant steps in this direction with her role in *The Bodyguard*, of course, but perhaps her greater successes in this endeavour were as a producer, when she put her money and time into largely African-American-made movies such as *Waiting to Exhale* and *Sparkle*.

While we're examining Whitney's impact on the wider culture, it needs to be understood that few musicians of any demographic or genre have received as many awards across their careers. If we detailed every single trophy on the Houston household mantelpiece, we'd end up filling most of this book, so instead let's briefly sum up with the major highlights.

> *'I Will Always Love You' remains the best-selling physical single by a female singer in history*

Musically, she dominated the soul, R&B and plain old pop music fields throughout the late Eighties, all of the Nineties and into the early years of the new millennium. She won 'only' six Grammy awards, but that's perhaps unrepresentative of her success and more of the rock-and-guitars preferences of the awarding body. The same organisation also gave her two Grammy Hall of Fame honours, a rare achievement for an artist who didn't live to see her 50th birthday, and she also nabbed two Emmy awards for good measure.

ABOVE *Pictured at the Whitney E Houston Academy School of Creative and Performing Arts (formerly the Franklin School in East Orange, NJ) in 1997 when it was renamed in her honour.*

RIGHT *In July 1988, Whitney received an honorary doctorate in Humanities from Grambling State University, Louisiana.*

Images Getty Images, Alamy

She also won an astounding 14 World Music Awards, 16 Billboard Music Awards – 11 of which she scooped in a single year (1993) – and 22 American Music Awards. A decade after her passing, she still holds the record for the most AMAs won in any single year by a woman: only Michael Jackson has the same score of eight wins. Whitney also holds the record for the most WMAs awarded in a single year. She was the first artist to be given a BET Lifetime Achievement Award, and she was the youngest artist to receive this honour, just as she was when she became the second recipient of the BET Walk of Fame.

The big picture is that Whitney got a lot of good work done in a short time – and just as well, as it turned out. She sold over 200 million albums, 60 million of those in the US alone, making her one of the best-selling recording artists of all time. All of her albums have been certified diamond, multi-platinum or platinum, and she is the first and currently only Black musician to have three albums reach diamond level. As we saw before, *The Bodyguard* is the best-selling soundtrack album ever, while 'I Will Always Love You' remains the best-selling physical single by a female singer in history, having shifted over 20 million copies. That's a lot of CD singles in second-hand shops, friends.

Those are the awards and the numbers, then: what about the learned institutions that welcomed Whitney onto their rosters? These were varied, but include the New Jersey Hall of Fame, the Rhythm and Blues Music Hall of Fame – and of course, the actual Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, where she was finally inducted in 2020 along with Depeche Mode, the Doobie Brothers, Nine Inch Nails, the Notorious B.I.G. and T. Rex.

What most people fail to appreciate was that Whitney was far more than a vocal stylist

OPPOSITE *At a 1988 benefit concert in Madison Square Garden, New York, Whitney raised $250,000 for the UNCF.*

ABOVE *The 2018 documentary* Whitney *featured interviews and exclusive archival footage to explore the dazzling highs and tragic lows of Whitney's career.*

BELOW *Several documentaries and biopics of Whitney's life have been released since her untimely death.*

Images Getty Images, Alamy

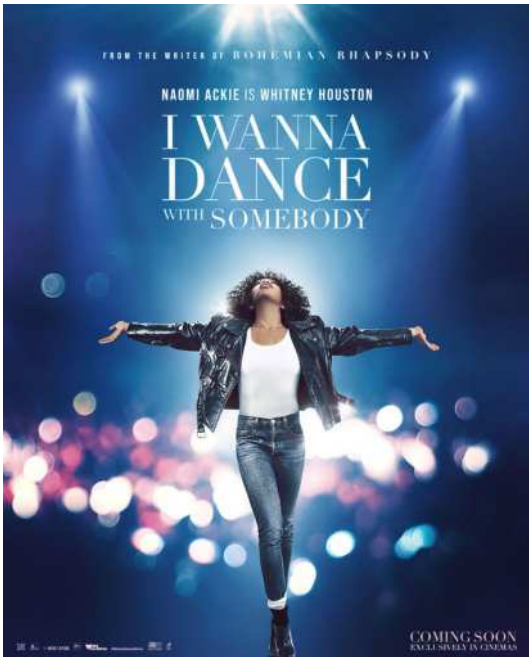
Whitney's stratospheric career and sudden, still-shocking death continue to attract attention

The most serious of her honours have been the renaming of the Franklin School in East Orange, New Jersey in 1997 to The Whitney E Houston Academy School of Creative and Performing Arts, and the award of an honorary Doctorate in Humanities from Grambling State University, Louisiana. These are deep-rooted gestures of respect, and to be taken seriously.

Whitney may not have been allotted a long life, but to the extent that any of us can hope to be remembered posthumously, the Houston name seems set to be a part of the conversation for a long time to come. For example, in March 2020, the Library of Congress added her version of 'I Will Always Love You' to its National Recording Registry, a list of "aural treasures worthy of preservation" due to their "cultural, historical and aesthetic importance" – presumably to Dolly Parton's great satisfaction.

Perhaps more mundanely, in October 2020 the music video for the same song notched up its billionth view on YouTube, with Whitney the first solo artist from the last century to reach that benchmark. It can be difficult to fully appreciate what a billion means, so let's just say that if you sat down and watched the 4'24" clip a billion times with no breaks, it would take you over 8,000 years. Imagine how many ads you'd have to sit through...

Whitney's posthumous activities don't simply mean leaving music behind, though. Her charitable organisation, the Whitney Houston Foundation for Children, was established in 1989, while her historical support of dozens of causes has now been parlayed into the Whitney E Houston Legacy Foundation. As you can see at whitneyhoustonfoundation.org, the Foundation acts as a grants and scholarships provider, and



TOP *Despite her personal struggles and tragic death, Whitney will be best remembered as one of the world's greatest singers.*

MIDDLE *Cissy Houston presenting a cheque on behalf of her daughter's foundation to the American Red Cross in 1992. Whitney left a significant charitable legacy, helping to raise vast sums of money for humanitarian causes during her lifetime.*

BOTTOM *The upcoming Whitney Houston biopic starring Naomi Ackie, is due to be released in December 2022.*

ABOVE *Whitney's music has stood the test of time: as of September 2022, 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' (her most popular track) has over 840 million plays on Spotify.*

collaborates with the aforementioned Whitney E Houston Academy School of Creative and Performing Arts in many ways beneficial to the American community.

Although Whitney has physically left us: her endeavours have endured. Her stratospheric career and sudden, still-shocking death continue to attract attention, though, hence the varying attempts in recent years to capture her story in documentary form. A 2015 movie called *Whitney* was directed by her friend Angela Bassett and starred Yaya DaCosta, focusing on the late star's turbulent relationships and private life and receiving mixed reviews. The documentary film *Whitney: Can I Be Me* – a more investigative effort – by the director Nick Broomfield, appeared in 2017.

Yet another documentary, also called *Whitney*, was authorised by the Houston estate, premiered at Cannes and was released in 2018: it's a rather better production than its predecessors, and is the one to try first, if you're thinking of watching any Whitney Houston documentary. There's another doc called *Whitney Houston & Bobbi Kristina: Didn't We Almost Have It All*, which also takes in the sad story of Whitney's late daughter.

Still, all of these may yet be eclipsed by a forthcoming biopic based on Whitney's life. *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* will star Naomi Ackie as Houston, and at the time of writing is set for release in December 2022. It's another estate-authorised piece, with Kasi Lemmons appointed as director and Clive Davis on board as a producer. Tellingly, it's being written by Anthony McCarten, who wrote the 2018 Queen biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* – the movie responsible for ensuring that every star of a certain stature gets a lightly fictionalised film treatment nowadays.

Perhaps the Whitney Houston story will be best understood in an entertaining, less heavily factual format. After all, you couldn't make her story up: Whitney's life, and shocking, premature death, make up a trajectory that no-one would believe if it weren't true.

Images Getty Images, Alamy

Whitney's voice was always revealing who she was – the pain she felt, the faith she had, the redemption she deeply yearned for, the love she was in search of. Whitney always sounded ***alive***

JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR GERRICK KENNEDY IN HIS 2020 ESSAY, WHICH ACCOMPANIED THE INDUCTION OF 'I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU' INTO THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS' NATIONAL RECORDING REGISTRY

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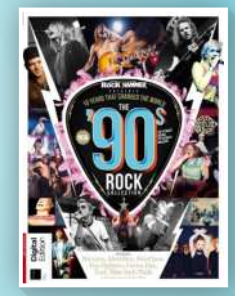

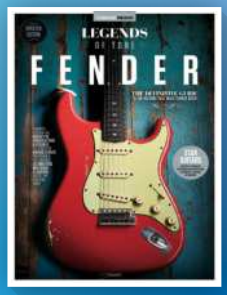

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